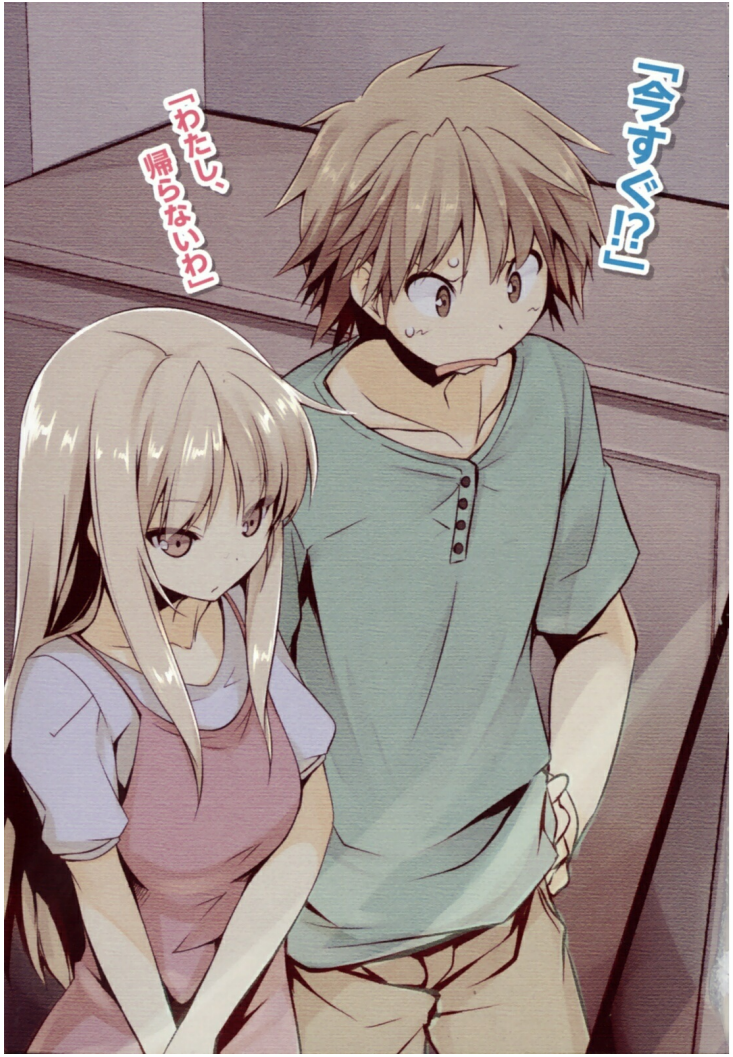
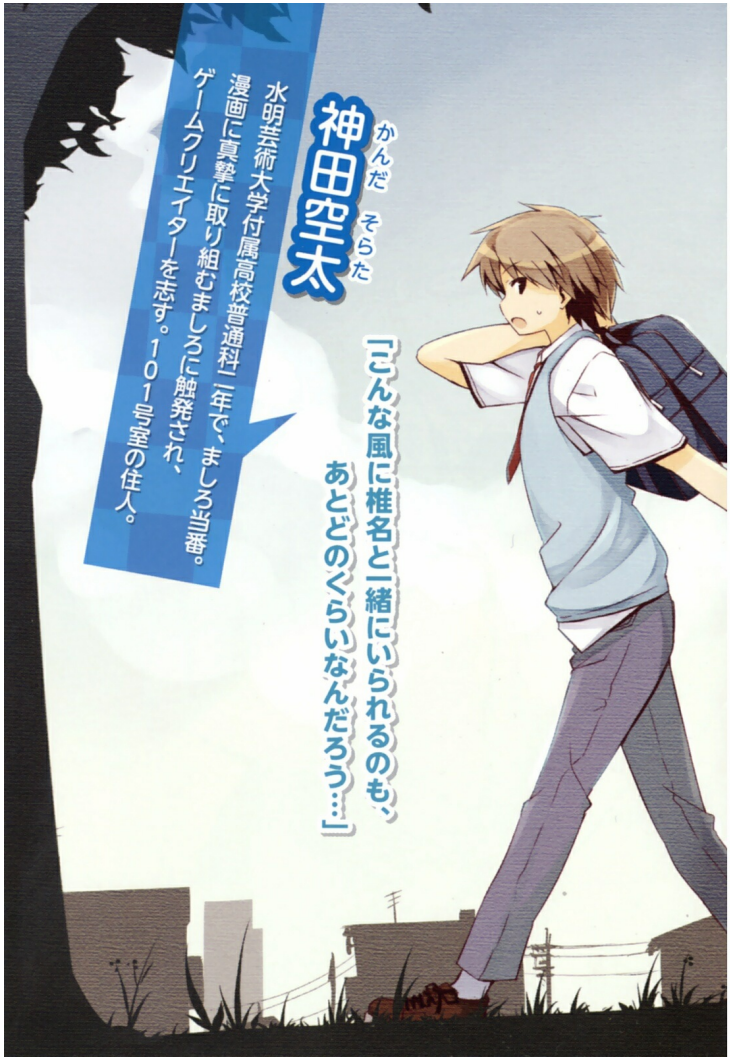
さくら荘の
3
ペットな彼女
鴨志田 一
Hajime Kamoshida
イラスト 溝口ケージ
illustration Keji Mizoguchi
電撃文庫



リタ・エインズワース

イギリス時代のましろのルームメイトで十年来の友人。
六歳から祖父のアトリエで本格的な絵画の勉強を開始し、
ましろとはそこで出会った。

美術科の一年生。世界的な天才画家だが、生活能力は皆無。
漫画家としてデビューし、見事連載が決まった。
天然局情発言で空太を振り回す202号室の住人。
椎名ましろ
しいな
「……にがっき？
食べたことはないわ」


水明芸術大学付属高校普通科一年で、ましろ当番。
漫画に真摯に取り組むましろに触発され、
ゲームクリエイターを志す。101号室の住人。
神田空太
かんだ そらた
「こんな風に椎名と一緒にいられるのも、
あとどのくらいなんだろう…」

「さあ、こーはいくん、もっと興奮していこう！」
上井草美咲
かみいぐさ みさき
美術科の二年生。特待生としての実力を持ちながら、アニメばかりを作り権利を剥奪された変人。幼なじみの仁に想いを寄せている。201号室在住。

普通科の二年生で美咲の幼なじみ。将来は脚本家を目指しており、美咲のアニメの脚本を担当している。恐るべき女ったらしでもある。103号室在住。
三鷹仁
みたか じん
「どこかに平和とか、やさしさって落ちてないかな……」
「あの子は、お姫様を奪いにきた悪い魔女だ。違うか？」
青山七海
あおやま ななみ
普通科の二年生で空太のクラスメイト。
バイト代で自活しながら声優養成所に通う努力家。
一般寮の家賃を滞納し、さくら荘に越してきた。
203号室在住。

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デザイン●T

Prologue

If there was a path that you have to walk on when you are an adult, what kind of a path would it be?

Would it be a straight path or a winding path?

Or maybe it’s an uphill journey.

I just hope that it won't be an endless flight of stairs.

There are only two things that I know right now.

One is that right now, I am on that path

And the other is that I can’t turn back on that path.

This, I think, is what I’ve learned from the events that took place this autumn.

Chapter 1 - The Autumn’s Storm Has Arrived

Part 1

“I really can’t understand what feelings are.”

It was the morning of the 1st of September. Even though no cats woke him up, Sorata woke up naturally and spoke as he blankly looked up at the ceiling.

He was in Room 101 of Sakurasou. How many mornings have passed ever since he moved in here? Sorata has been living in Sakurasou- the den of the troubled students of his school, for over a year already. His body and mind has been accustomed to living here, so he felt at ease waking up in the mornings as if it was his real home.

However, today was different. Even though he couldn’t even keep his eyes half open, his mind was extremely clear and his body was filled with unexplainable tension.

“This is really cumbersome…”

It would’ve been better if he just had a bad case of headaches or suffocating chest pains instead.

“Hup.”

For a change of pace, Sorata let out a short yell and sat up straight on his bed.

The reason for that unpleasant feeling was obvious. It was because he was still troubled by the game design audition.

He thought that he would be able to forget about it by laughing it off with the other Sakurasou members, but it wasn’t that easy.

Sorata wanted to overwrite his failed memories into a successful one. The feeling of his need to proceed to the next steps pressured him greatly.

Even though he knew that thinking about it wouldn’t help at all…

“This isn’t good. I need to attend school again from today. Anyhow, what time is it right now?”

Suppressing a yawn, he looked toward the clock near bed.

The hands on the clock were pointing to half past four.

“So it’s still during the night.”

He rubbed his half-asleep eyes. He wanted to crawl back into his bed, but he didn’t think that he would be able to fall back to sleep in his anxious state of mind.

“Ha…”

Sorata gasped for a large amount of air after that sigh. When he did, he noticed that there was an unfamiliar odour mixed inside his room. It wasn’t his first time smelling that odour, but it wasn’t something that Sorata smelt during his daily life.

“This smell is…”

It was probably some odour of the chemicals used for paints and art work.

But why was that smell in this room?

Puzzled, Sorata looked around his room and sensed something strange from his walls. Until yesterday, the wallpaper in his room was a plain one without any patterns but now there were drawings in one corner of the wall.

The drawing that he noticed was of a giant cat-shaped robot that was standing up on its two hind legs. And around that robot, there were tons of other giant cat robots that appeared to be its enemies. The images and the colouring gave off cute and fairytale-style feeling, but it also gave off the feelings of blood thirst that caught ones interest. It must’ve been an image board for an anime starting in autumn.

“What on earth is that?”

Sorata wished that he was just dreaming. However, here in Sakurasou, Sorata knew that there were aliens that pulled these kinds of pranks like it was nothing. When asked whether this was in his dream or the reality, he would have to answer that this was happening in real life.

While he was wondering how he should fix up the drawing on his wall, the door that he left slightly open for his seven cats that he picked up, was slammed open with great force from the outside.

“Good morning, Kohai-kun.”

As usual, the intruder was the resident of Room 201, Misaki Kamiigusa the alien. Her smile that didn't even contain a slightest amount of guilt was shining like the sun. She was already in her school uniform and had her bags on her shoulders as if she was going to school right now.

It wasn't healthy to deal with Misaki as soon as one gets up.

"I hate being woken up like this, so come back after I sleep."

Sorata fell on his bed and covered his head with the pillow.

"It's already morning, Kohai-kun! We need to go to school!"

"Half past four is the middle of the night."

"If it's past three, then it's considered to be the morning!"

Misaki pulled at the pillow.

"It doesn't change the fact that it's still half past four."

"The second semester starts today, but why are you acting so weak Kohai-kun? Are you trying to date this pillow? Return my Kohai-kun~!"

Talking selfishly, Misaki took the pillow away from Sorata. Thanks to that, his defence was instantly reduced.

"Now, Kohai-kun, get more excited! Let's hurry to school!"

"The school gates aren't even open yet."

Even though he said that, Sorata pulled his body up. He no longer felt sleepy because he was too busy answering Misaki.

When he faced Misaki who had her hands on her hips, Sorata saw the scribbles all over his wall behind her back. He sighed deeply inside his heart. He really wished that this was all a dream.

"You must rub all of this out later."

"This is「Galactic Cat Nyaboron」!"

“Are you even listening to me!”

“It’s an anime character that I’ve been designing ever since I was in kindergarten and the robot in the middle is the protagonist「Nyaboron」! It’s the earth’s final line of defence against the space invaders known as the Nyangolownians. After repelling the first Nyangolownian 20 years ago, they researched the alien’s cells and cultivated them and after bending the time space continuum, it became the hybrid robot that combined earth and the alien invader’s science! Plus, it’s 333meters tall and is the same height as the Tokyo Tower. Well? It’s simple right?”

There certainly was an illustration of the Tokyo Tower for the size comparison.

Not that it was very important…

“I was planning to spend a serious and quiet day! Please return the melancholy of my youth!”

Where did his quietness go when he woke up? Thanks to Misaki, it looks like it flew off somewhere far away. Apparently, being deep in thought wasn’t even allowed in Sakurasou.

“If you’re so curious, I’ll tell you! There is a drama about a lot of men who dedicated their passion, life, and even soul to the development of Nyaboron! ”

“Yes, yes. I already know that I can’t stop someone like you, Misaki-senpai…”

She really wasn’t listening to Sorata at all.

“Nyaboron’s development was a challenge! During the development phase, a lot of the men lost their will because of the deaths of their fellow workers and even after completing the robot, the tail wouldn’t move and chaos spread throughout the development site! In the end, some of the creators wanted to give up making it and tried to leave the factory. But at that instant, Nekomata the coordinator of the site told them this. ‘Men, what do you plan to do after you leave this place? Ah, don’t worry; I’m not trying to stop you. But if you’re going to do something with all your strength, why don’t you work towards something that will leave your names in the history? For our dead workers as well.' At Nekomata’s words, the site became even more passionate for their work! ”

“It’s a really great drama for the males! It reminds me of the classics! ”

“If I explain it all, it would take at least five hours~. What do you say?”

“I did get slightly interested, but please don’t!”

“Then I’ll tell you about Nyaboron. The Galactic Cat Nyaboron’s concept is the hard and hardboiled and boiled.”

“I don’t need to hear about it! And what’s with that concept! What the heck! What the heck’s going on with me? Why am I in this situation…. Someone please tell me! And save me!”

His desperate feelings didn’t reach anyone.

“To pilot Nyaboron, you need a special requirement and that is to have tasted the depths of depression in their life.”

“What kind of a requirement is that!”

“To start up the Negative Reactor up to the set amount, a deep life experience is necessary! With that requirement, the main character Nekosuke marries the heroine Nekoko in episode 1 after ten years of dating, but on their wedding day, the 2nd invasion of Nyangolownians starts after 20 years of silence and boom! A Nyangolownian kills Nekosuke’s older brother Nekochiki before his eyes and Nekosuke falls to the pits of despair and gets up with only revenge on his mind, yelling 'Nyangolownian!'”

“Umm~, just wondering, but how long does this story go for?”

“Probably three days?”

Misaki’s smiling face now appeared to be terrifying to Sorata.

“Stop it right there please! I don’t want to be late for school even after waking up at half past four.”

“But! Nyangolownian has a footstool that surpassed all humanity, so it was impossible to defeat with military weapons or even jet fighters.”

“What do you mean, footstool that surpassed all humanity? Does that even exist?”

“After his experience, Nekosuke makes the decision. This is the most important scene

of episode 1! Oh my, Nekosuke finally got married after 10 years of dating, but he hands the divorce papers to Nekoko! To resolve his bitter feelings! He left a note saying 'I cannot forgive the Footstool. I have no excuses. I will not ask of you to understand me. Think ill of me. Adios.' to Nekoko and hides all traces of himself. Afterwards, he's sobbing in a backstreet in the rain without an umbrella!"

"What's with Nekosuke's emotions! And that's supposed to be hard and hardboiled and boiled? And adios? Who would use such phrases like that these days!"

"And when Nekosuke becomes the pilot for Nyarobon!"

"— And an endless battle with the Nyangolownians. How amazing. Awesome! Alright, end of story!"

"Kohai-kun, be more supportive of it~. Do you really feel good when you let down my feelings like that?"

"I don't think you're let down at all. Why don't you go and tell Jin about these things. He can write up the scenario and you can turn it into an anime."

"… That's true, but."

"Huh? What?"

This time, Misaki really looked depressed. With a dejected expression, she sat next to Sorata.

"… Jin isn't coming back."

Sorata appeared to have set off a landmine.

"He's sleeping over…"

Misaki wrapped her knees around and shrank.

"Ah, that's, umm…. I'm sorry."

"He's with another woman right now…."

Misaki was in love with her childhood friend Jin Mitaka. And she was madly in love with him with that wild personality of hers.

Sorata couldn't bear to look at Misaki, so he turned his gaze to the drawings on the wall. He had to find a different topic to talk about. At this rate, Misaki would fall into further depression.

"Senpai, over there! What's that?"

He pointed to a spot on the wall. It was a Nyangolownian that had a hunchback with steam coming out of its mouth. Its messed up hair was like a mole's.

"Oh~ as expected of Kohai-kun! You really have a knack for looking at these things! That's one of the generals of the invaders army, 「Ein the Cat-back」!"

Then, Misaki swiftly picked up her pace.

"Apart from him, the other generals include 「Tubai the Cat-eye」, 「Dry to Cat-mouth」, 「Pia the Cat-tongue」, 「Poomp the Cat-food」 and 「Nekochiki of the Catfight」."

"One of them doesn't follow the norm. Wasn't that the name of Nekosuke's dead brother?"

Sorata felt foolish of himself for even remembering the names. But if Misaki was able to become happy through their talk, that was enough.

"That's the point! Nekochiki was actually alive and he betrayed them all."

"Ehh? But what for?"

"Because Nekochiki has always loved Nekoko! But when Nekosuke made Nekoko cry by giving her the divorce papers, Nekochiki was raging."

No matter how one looked at it, the connections were complicated. Nekosuke actually decided to fight for Nekochiki's revenge, but that made Nekochiki betray them. And to think that the cause of those troubles was over a girl… It wasn't something that could be taken seriously during dawn.

"To go back to the story, 「Ein the Cat-back」 who appears in episode 3 was so strong that it destroyed 60% of humanity!"

"Then the earth wasn't protected at all."

"To make it even worse, Nekosuke dies even before he rides Nyarobon."

“The main character died?!”

“What will happen to the earth!”

“It would be better if it just collapsed.”

“But there was a ray of hope. Because there wasn’t only one person who tasted the depths of despair! Nekoko who received the divorce papers after her happy marriage had the resolve to pilot Nyaboron!”

“That’s beyond being in despair, Nekoko was… divorced straight after she got married, her husband has died and now she’s going to pilot the robot? Would she be able to? She wouldn’t even want to look at it.”

“Kohai-kun, women are strong! Also, Nekoko was originally a pilot for jet fighters, so her sense of piloting was superb! Nekosuke pales in comparison.”

“Then you should just let Nekoko pilot it from the start! Bring back Nekosuke!”

“You really don’t know anything Kohai-kun~. It was Nekosuke’s death that brought Nekoko to the depths of despair and gave her the burning resolve for revenge! It’s adamant! And persistent! And demanding! Nekoko had a bad past when Nekosuke cheated on her with a different woman during their first year of dating, but Nekoko went to the woman and not Nekosuke!”

“Wow! Nekoko is a really terrifying woman! But is it ok if someone like her is the heroine? Will people watch it? Won’t it plant trauma to the children?”

“Nekoko tore up and threw away Nyangolownians without mercy and even performed a cobra twist every now and then!”

“Nekoko is really strong~ how amazing~.”

Sorata was reaching his limit of playing along with Misaki. At this rate, his brain was about to have a meltdown.

“Now, on a completely unrelated note!”

Misaki suddenly pointed to Sorata.

“There’s something that I’ve been meaning to tell you!”

“That really is unrelated!”

Misaki moved her finger that was pointed to Sorata somewhere else. She stopped and pointed at the clock.

“That clock isn’t moving.”

“What?”

At her words, he checked the clock. The seconds hand really wasn’t moving.

“Whoa! Then what time is it?”

Sorata quickly looked at his phone display. The digital clock told him that it was eight o’clock.

He should’ve been preparing to go to school. So that was why it was bright even when his light was off.

“Why did the battery run out now…”

“That’s not it, Kohai-kun.”

“What is?”

“I have the battery!”

Misaki held the battery up high.

“Don’t play a cruel joke like that on me!”

Sorata yelled that to Misaki as he ran out of the room. It wasn’t the time to be staying in the room like that. From Sakurasou to school, it was a 10 minute walk. Normally, he left the dorm at 8:20 in the morning. If he hurried, then he would’ve been able to arrive on time, but that only applied if Sorata was by himself.

Sorata had someone to look after- the resident of Room 202 was Mashiro Shiina. It took 5 minutes to wake her up, 5 minutes to comb her hair, 5 minutes to get her changed and another 5 minutes for miscellaneous things. Beyond that, Mashiro would take more time for other things and Sorata knew that they were going to be late.

While he was running in the hallway trying to think of a way to avoid being late, Misaki ran passed him.

“I’ll be off.”

Misaki enthusiastically ran out the front door. Barely paying any attention, Sorata rushed to the bathroom to wash his face. At that moment, he felt something soft beneath his foot. Being surprised, Sorata came to a halt.

Awkwardly, he looked down at the bathroom floor. Something had fallen on there. It was a pair of women’s pyjamas. It was a camisole with laces. Along with it, there were panties that appeared to be a set with the camisole scattered on the floor.

Without looking embarrassed or shocked, Sorata casually looked up.

He already knew the owner of the clothes. After all, they were the clothes that Sorata put out for Mashiro last night… It was obvious that he knew whose they were.

“To leave them behind like snake skin…”

Since Sorata didn’t want to have them lying about, he picked them up and put them away.

“Am I her mother or something?”

He picked up the panties last.

At that instant, his heat started to beat faster.

The cloth in his hand felt warm.

A person’s warmth still remained on it.

“Don’t tell me, this is?!”

It was a fresh pair of panties.

His palm started to get sweaty.

“Why did she leave these lying around!”

It would be troublesome if he didn't take care of these panties right now.

"If someone sees me like this…"

His life would come to an end if somebody did.

Behind Sorata, the footstep sounds of despair came towards him.

"If somebody sees it, what would happen?"

His whole body froze and Sorata only turned his neck slowly.

The person standing at the door of the bathroom was his classmate and the resident of Room 203, Nanami Aoyama who moved into the dorm this summer.

She was already changed and was ready to go. As expected of a model student. She didn't need to worry about being late at all.

Nanami's gaze fell onto Sorata's hand immediately. In his hand, he held a pair of pyjamas, camisole and rolled up panties.

"I want to say something first, so you'll hear me out right?"

" You sure that you don't mean 「for the last time」?"

Nanami was smiling brightly as if something good happened.

"I, it's not like that! I'm just doing my duty!"

"It sure doesn't look that way- universally speaking that is."

Nanami's smiling face was chilling. Her eyes weren't smiling at all.

"T, then what do you think it looks like?"

"Pervert. [1]"

She didn't hesitate in her answer.

"You mean from a caterpillar to a butterfly?[2]"

"From human to human scraps."

Nanami's look of contempt was waiting for Sorata.

"I'm telling you, it's not like that! It was Shiina who threw these all over the floor."

"Oh~. So you're now going to blame Shiina after feeling the temperature of them."

Sorata hastily shoved the pyjamas and the undergarments into the washing machine.

Now wasn't the time to be lectured by Nanami. Sorata remembered that he had to get ready to go to school.

"Anyway, where is Shiina?"

At Sorata's question, the door to the showers opened.

"Did you call me?"

The steam from the shower flowed out to the bathroom and fogged up the mirror. By reflex, Sorata looked towards the source of the voice.

In the steam was the naked Mashiro. Her slim and perfect figure as well as her white skin was blinding Sorata's view.

Mashiro was looking at Sorata. Sorata was looking at Mashiro as well. The two of them just blinked in sync.

Without screaming or panicking, Sorata slammed the door to the shower with a bang.

"Problem solved."

"Explain how that was「Problem solved」."

Nanami fiercely look at Sorata with her hands on her hips.

"You're quite wrong if you think I would be panicking by a situation like that which only appears on candid camera."

"I don't think you should be saying that with a bloody nose."

"Eh, really?"

After wiping away the steam from the mirror, Sorata checked out his reflection. For

some reason, he really did have a bloody nose, so he quickly stopped it with some tissues.

Behind him, the shower door slightly opened. Seeing via the reflection on the mirror, he spotted Mashiro sticking her head out through the small gap like a small animal.

“Is Sorata a panty thief?”

“I’m not!”

“Then, did you just peek at them?”

“It was just an accident!”

“Do you want to look?”

“If you show me.”

Sorata gave up and answered Mashiro truthfully.

“Don’t change your view!”

He was told off by Nanami. Mashiro seemed to be in deep thought.

“Don’t take it seriously either Mashiro!”

“If Sorata really wants to see.”

“Al~right! Then let’s just pretend that I do want to!”

“Don’t play along with her! Get changed right now Mashiro!”

Nanami grabbed Sorata’s collar and dragged him out of the bathroom.

“Shiina, hurry it up.”

As he said that, Sorata closed the door and prepared his heart for Nanami’s small talk. However, Nanami only sighed quietly. She must’ve been sick of it. It looked like she had already given up. It would’ve been better if she swore at him.

“I’ll head out first.”

“I’m begging you, just insult me!”

“Sorata, think about what you have just said. It might be too late now though.”

She must’ve been really sick of it.

“No! I just meant don’t abandon me!”

“Whichever you mean, I don’t have the time, so let’s stop. I have committee meetings in the morning from today.”

“What? What committee?”

“Culture Festival Planning Committee.”

“Ehh~, you’ve got quite a bothersome duty.”

In Sorata’s high school, the culture festival was famous for being nothing like the usual high schools due to their association to the Suimei University of the Arts. Every year, from the 3rd of November, they hold the culture festival for a week that also incorporated the near-by markets and shops- enough to say that it was more like a community festival instead of a school one. There was no need to say that the festival was the largest and the most flamboyant of the neighbourhood.

Hence, being in the Culture Festival Planning Committee was very rewarding, but it was infamous for being very complicated and stressful.

“Aoyama, will you be ok?”

It would’ve been bearable if Nanami was just a student while doing the committee work, but in her case, she was working for her own living fees as well as attending an academy to achieve her dream of becoming a voice actress. Handling all of that would strain her body.

Nanami had a case of straining her body too much and falling ill, so Sorata was quite worried about her.

“I’ll be fine.”

“You saying that you’ll be fine isn’t very convincing.”

“I don’t know what to do after hearing that from you…. When I’m very, very busy…. I’ll be relying on you Sorata, so….”

As she continued to talk, Nanami’s voice grew quiet. She slightly looked up at Sorata with shaky eyes.

“Can I do that?”

“Yeah, umm, it doesn’t really matter with me.”

Sorata felt strange seeing Nanami like that. It must be because he felt pleased that he would be able to help someone strong- like Nanami.

“If you say that, I might actually ask of you in the future you know?”

“Well, you do that.”

“Don’t forget what you’ve said today.”

“I won’t, so you should head to school before you’re late.”

“That’s what I should be saying to you. Then see you at school.”

Waving her hand, Nanami headed towards the school with skips in her steps. Did something good happen to her?

“Seeing you two in the morning makes me sick.”

The one who appeared while saying that was the caretaker of Sakurasou- Chihiro Sengoku the art teacher. She was wearing heavy make-up and a showy designer suit. It looked like she prepared hard for it. Was it because today was the first day of the term? Or did she set up a meeting in the afternoon? Well, whichever the reason, it didn’t really matter…

“Isn’t it too much to say that you feel sick looking at your students?”

“Kanda, if you arrive late to school on the first day of the semester, I will leave a scar on you that will never be healed, so be prepared for it.”

“How should I say this, but you are amazing. I look up to you in some ways.”

“I would get into trouble for your actions, so be aware of that.”

Sorata couldn’t believe that this type of teacher was actually respected in the school; the world was really a messed up place.

“Bring Mashiro and Akasaka as well.”

“Why are you dumping the responsibilities on me! Shiina aside, bringing Akasaka is impossible!”

The tenant next to Sorata’s room: Ryuunosuke Akasaka of Room 102 was a hikikomori that hasn’t gone to school for over 5 years. It was even hard to spot Ryuunosuke in Sakurasou, so sometimes they forgot that Ryuunosuke Akasaka even lived in Sakurasou.

“You’re such a cold person. You should value your friends.”

“The teacher should value their students.”

“Why should I~. I won’t benefit from it.”

After saying those cruel words, Chihiro left towards the school.

Being left behind by himself, Sorata looked towards Room 102 towards the end of the hallway.

“H~ey, Akasaka. Today’s the first day of the second semester.”

There was no response as expected.

He thought that he should send a text instead, Sorata returned to his room and grabbed his phone.

— Today’s the start of semester 2.

When he did, a reply came astonishingly fast. This was probably sent by Maid-chan: the automatic reply program AI.

— Ryuunosuke-sama is currently investigating the importance of the second set of moves, which resembles a gorilla, in the radio exercise. I hope that you’ll be able to understand. From Maid-chan who wants to give her master the stamp marks[3].

The reply didn't come from Ryuunosuke as expected. What on earth was Ryuunosuke dong then? No, or was it that again? One of Maid-chan's jokes. It probably was. We'll leave it at that.

Sorata gave up on Ryuunosuke without much thought and returned to the bathroom to talk to Mashiro. Since he left her alone for quite a while, she should've been dressed at least.

"Shiina, did you get dressed?"

"Sorata."

"If you haven't, hurry up. We're going to be late."

"Get me some clothes to change into."

"Why are you telling me now! What were you doing for the last few minutes!"

"I stood here naked."

Sorata heard those words behind his back as he tried to go upstairs and nearly fell backwards.

He went inside Mashiro's room and got the school blouse, vest, skirt, socks, grabbed a set of pink underwear off the floor and returned to the bathroom with an extra bath towel just in case.

He passed them through to Mashiro through the gap in the door.

"Uniform?"

She asked an unexpected question.

"To put it simply, the second semester is starting today."

"… Second semester?"

She parroted him as if she has never heard of the term before.

"Do you even know what a second semester is?"

"I've heard of it."

“Heh.”

“I’ve never tasted it before though.”

“How will your stomach be fine if you eat that!”

“Really?”

“Never mind, and just get dressed! If we’re late, I’ll be scared for life!”

Rushing Mashiro, Sorata returned to his room to get changed, grabbed his bag, and headed upstairs again.

He packed Mashiro’s bag and ran downstairs once more.

Why did he need to run all over the place as if he was doing a punishment game? He didn’t expect this to happen in the morning… Nothing has changed at all.

When he returned downstairs, Mashiro was changed and was in front of the bathroom. However, her hair was still damp, she only had one sock on and her school blouse was half tucked in.

“Hey~, really now! Can’t you get dressed properly?”

“Sorata told me to get dressed quickly.”

“Then do it properly anyway.”

He dried Mashiro with the bath towel. Since he didn’t have the time, he gave up using the dryer. He snatched the other sock in the basket and squatted down at Mashiro’s feet.

“Hey, lift your foot up.”

Mashiro lifted her right leg up. It was the side that was already wearing a sock.

“Are you trying to be funny?”

“No.”

“Then what do you mean!”

“I don’t know.”

“Someone get me some medicine from the living room!”

This time, Mashiro lifted her left foot up. He put on the sock on Mashiro's smooth and white foot. He made her tuck in her own skirt and now they were ready….

Is what he thought, but he noticed another piece of cloth in the basket that he missed.

Pink panties.

"Hey…"

Mashiro was trying to leave the bathroom first.

"Sorata, we're going to be late."

"Wear your panties first!"

"Will it be ok if we're late?"

"Is that the issue right now?"

Sorata remembered a dark piece of history in his head.

It was around April. There was a time when Mashiro went to school once without her panties on. That day, all that was on Sorata's mind was the panties, so he experienced the worst day in his life.

He didn't want to go through that traumatic experience again.

Sorata handed the panties to Mashiro.

"But Sorata told me to hurry."

"Don't forget about something that's more important than your own life!"

Mashiro wasn't even grateful to Sorata's point and she passed her legs through the holes in the panties before Sorata's eyes.

At her fluid movement, Sorata forgot to look away.

Mashiro lifted her body up as she put on the panties. With her butt sticking out, Mashiro lifted up the pink cloth up to her private parts. Looking proud of herself, she fidgeted under the unexplored territories under her skirt and fixed up her tucked in blouse.

“Uu, uu, uuf! Wa, you!”

“You don’t sound like a seal at all.”

“I’m not trying to sound like one! And get changed when I leave! You surprised me, damn it!”

“Sorata, you’re acting weird.”

“What if I saw that place or the other place!”

Mashiro checked her skirt.

“Did you see?”

“I didn’t, but be more careful next time!”

What was important wasn’t if he saw it or not, but that Mashiro’s actions provoked Sorata’s imagination to think of indecent thoughts.

“You should really be more self-aware.”

Today was the start of the second semester, but Sorata felt edgy about what might happen at school at this rate.

“Don’t worry.”

“I don’t trust your word at all.”

“Sorata will do something.”

“Don’t rely on me from the start! At least suspect me to do something!”

At Sorata’s desperate afterthought, Mashiro lost interest in their conversation and was looking somewhere else.

“Hey Sorata.”

“What now!”

“We’re going to be late.”

“It really ticks me off hearing that from you, you know?”

Realizing that they didn’t have enough time, Sorata grabbed Mashiro’s hand and dragged her outside.

The clock was pointing to 8:30.

If they ran with all their strength, they might arrive on time. However, Sorata found out from his summer holidays how Mashiro’s running skills were. Also, to make things worse, Mashiro didn’t run by herself- she had to be dragged along by someone else. If the two of them arrived to school with Sorata holding onto Mashiro’s hand, he didn’t know what kind of rumours might spread out through the school.

“I’ve got no other choice.”

Sorata looked at the parked bicycle in the yard. It was a generic mothers’ bicycle that one of his seniors left behind a few years ago.

It was rusty and old, but it would be useable as long as it rolled.

He put his bag and Mashiro’s bag into the basket and sat on the seat.

“Shiina, hop on! Hurry, hurry!”

Mashiro silently sat on the back.

“Hold on tight so that you don’t fall.”

Mashiro put her arms around Sorata. He could feel her heat on his back.

Her body was slender and soft. The nice fragrance could be smelt, since she had a shower earlier.

“Don’t hold on too tight! I might lose control and crash.”

“Sorata is always selfish.”

“I want to be judged on who’s right or wrong at a court.”

Trying to not think about the feeling on his back, Sorata poured out all his energy into paddling the bike.

As the bicycle left Sakurasou and started to go down the slope, it started to speed up.

The feeling of the wind rushing by as they rode down was refreshing. It was still humid, but since today was the first of September, the air had an autumn-like scent and the blue sky had patches of thin disappearing clouds that foretold the cool change of weather.

Sorata felt like the scenery was telling him that the summer holidays were over. At the same time, his worries disappeared like the clouds up in the sky.

He was feeling completely different to how he felt last time, the same time last year- when he said that he's life was boring, bland or wished for a time machine. Did he feel this way because of the audition that he sat for? Or was it because he met Mashiro? He didn't know the answer. Although he didn't know the answer, he knew that he was thirsting to move on forward.

That feeling was impossible to stomach and he felt like he wanted to sprint on forwards.

So he was quite happy about the start of the second semester. For some strange reason, Sorata actually felt happy as he pedalled the bike.

The edgy feelings that he had this morning now became his strength to pedal.

"Hey Shiina."

"Sorata always breaks his promise."

Sorata had promised to call Mashiro by her first name when they were by themselves.

"Hey Mashiro."

Sorata became slightly nervous again.

"Yeah?"

"Do your best with your serialization."

"Yeah."

Sorata felt Mashiro's grip strengthening slightly. But it could've been just his feeling.

“You too Sorata.”

“Huh?”

“I’ll cheer on for you.”

At Mashiro’s unexpected words, Sorata couldn’t give a response.

He tried to hold back the warmness that he felt in him, but it was pointless as the warmth reached his face and dyed it red. He never knew. He never knew that having someone cheering for you was this joyful.

He started to pedal faster. As he did, he felt Mashiro clinging onto him even tighter so that she won’t fall off.

Mashiro always surprised Sorata. At the start, he was moved by her existence then he was lost for words at her inability to care for herself, and finally he realised that he should be doing his best as well thanks to Mashiro.

And now, he was accustomed to all the exciting things happening routinely. Until some time ago, he thought of all those things to be pointless. But now, he didn’t feel that way any longer- he was enjoying those things.

'For now, I’ll study hard in programming. I should continue to submit game designs, but I want to create a work that I can test out.' Sorata started to think those thoughts because he didn’t want to study just so that he can present his ideas well, but also to create his own game.

By the time they were passing by the playground, Mashiro leaned her head on his back. Getting a bad feeling about it, Sorata looked behind him only to find Mashiro sleeping with her eyes closed. At her regular breaths, her shoulders were bobbing up and down.

“Don’t sleep!”

“I’m awake.”

“Well, that’s good, but make sure that you don’t sleep.”

The scenery was just a blur as they rode the bike.

“What did you talk about with Nanami?”

Mashiro asked with her eyes closed.

“You guys were talking in front of the bathroom.”

“What? Ah, that was just… about the Culture Festival Planning Committee, and things like that.”

“Was that all?”

“Yeah, what’s wrong?”

“That’s fine.”

“What? What are you saying?”

“Since Sorata and Nanami are close.”

“We’re not that close.”

“Don’t give an excuse.”

“I’m not giving you an excuse! What I want to know is why did you have a shower in the morning?”

This was the first time seeing Mashiro take a shower in the morning ever since she came to Sakurasou in April.

“Because my hair smelt like paint.”

“You must be really free if you’re painting in the morning.”

“I’ve always wanted to do a mural at least once.”

What did Mashiro just say?

Murals. That was what she just said.

“Just wait a moment!”

The lights turned red, so Sorata braked to a stop. Due to the laws of physics,

Mashiro's weight pushed down on him.

"My nose got squashed."

"That's not the problem! When you say mural, you mean the painting in my room?"

"Yes."

"So you were a culprit as well."

"Sorata didn't say anything."

"How can I say anything if I'm asleep!"

"Normally, people would wake up."

"I don't want to hear that from you!"

If Sorata was being his usual self, he probably would've woken up. However, he was too worn-out from the game presentation that he gave for the first time in his life. If he considered his preparation time, he was on the edge for nearly a week. So when that tension loosened, it wasn't unusual for him to crash into a deep sleep.

"Ein the Cat-back was terrifying."

"So you created all that mess?"

"It's really strong."

"How strong is it?"

He gave up on keeping track with their conversation.

"Something comes out."

"From where? What comes out?"

"Trauma."

"Now I really want to know how it comes out!"

"It came to destroy Nyaboron."

“Is it really that interesting? Are you a fan of Misaki-senpai’s world?”

“I like Misaki. She’s cute and funny.”

“I don’t think of her as a bad person either. It’s just that she’s really a bother!”

As Sorata was pointlessly bickering with Mashiro at the lights, a policeman who appeared to be in his 30s stopped his bicycle next to them.

When their eyes met, Sorata lightly greeted him.

“H- hello.”

“Yes, hello.”

The police answered him back cheerfully. It was important to maintain a friendly relationship with the town members.

The light was still on red.

The policeman spotted Mashiro on the back of the bicycle. He opened his mouth to say something, but before he could say anything, Sorata cut in.

“It’s still hot even though it’s September.”

“Hmm? Ah, yeah it is.”

The lights finally turned green.

“Then I’ll be on my way to school.”

Sorata politely spoke and started to pedal at full strength.

“Sure, be careful on your way… that’s not it, you kid! I knew it! Stop right there, it’s dangerous for two people to ride together!”

“Damn it! I thought I could’ve fooled him.”

The policeman was hot on their trails.

“Let me off the hook this time.”

“Laws are applied to everyone equally.”

“It’s not something that’s serious!”

Sorata sped up recklessly. He was putting all of his strength into his legs.

“Hey, stop right there! Boy!”

“Are you going to take responsibility if I’m late?”

“That’s not the police’s responsibility.”

“Then it’s unfortunate, but it seems like it’s impossible for us to reach a mutual understanding!”

He cycled even faster.

“Sorata.”

Even during these situations, Mashiro’s voice was indifferent.

“Now isn’t the best time!”

“It’s something important.”

“Make it short!”

“There’s a strange person following us.”

“I know that much!”

“Should I report it?”

“That person is the police!”

The policeman continued to follow the fleeing Sorata continuously.

“Stop! I told you to stop! That student who’s having a lovey dovey time with his girlfriend needs to stop right now!”

“She’s not my girlfriend.”

“Who is she then!”

“Sorata is my master.”

Mashiro spoke out needless things again.

“You really need to stop saying that!”

“What’s with that embarrassing relationship! It makes me jealous as a graduate from an all boys high school! I’m not letting you escape, student!”

The policeman started to yell out nonsense that Sorata couldn’t understand.

“Why do you still hold a grudge over something like that! Give up on your personal resentments!”

“You won’t escape from me! I may not look it, but I used to be a ghost member of the Wandervogel Club[4] and I was immersed with dates every single day!”

“That’s not something that intimidates me!”

On the other hand, Sorata trained his body in the soccer club until his middle school years. He had the handicap of caring Mashiro on the bike, but he wasn’t going loose. In fact, he can’t afford to get caught by the police now.

The policeman was already short on breath.

“Stop right there! I know that you guys live in Sakurasou! Don’t think that you can escape!”

“Does that mean that Sakurasou is under surveillance from even the police? We’re not criminals!”

“You have the potential!”

“Don’t say it so bluntly!”

Gradually, the policeman’s voice got quieter.

“S-stop…. Please… I’m asking you…”

The pursuer was definitely getting slower. Sorata decided that this was his chance, so he squeezed out what was left in him and sped up. His thigh muscles were screaming in pain. The lactic acid built up in his body and his legs weren't moving well. However, he didn't give in and continued to paddle.

"I… won't get mad... so… stop…"

Leaving the poor policeman behind, Sorata out cycled him perfectly.

When Sorata finally arrived at school, he ignored the other students' dagger like gazes and parked the bicycle at the bicycle parks. There were too many people who arrived barely on time just like Sorata and Mashiro.

At this rate, the rumour of him coming to school with Mashiro together will spread like a wildfire around the school, and it will obviously be exaggerated until it sounds like a summer romance story.

But he didn't have the leisure to think about such things.

Thanks to the cycling match that he just had with the police man, Sorata was exhausted. Sorata slid off the bicycle seat and collapsed on the concrete blocks. His stretched out legs were so swollen, he didn't think that he could stand up anytime soon.

He breathed in the oxygen with rough gasps.

"Go… to… the classroom… first."

"Ok."

Even though Mashiro just agreed to go, she didn't even try to move.

"I'm… fine."

"Yeah."

But Mashiro was still not moving.

"Are you going to wait for me?"

Mashiro shook her head in denial.

“Where are the shoe lockers?”

“I should’ve guessed…. You’re always like this. Just wait for a bit. I’ll revive any moment now.”

Still breathing roughly, he struggled to stand up.

As he tried to head to the buildings, he saw a round shaped car outside the gates. Someone that Sorata knew well came out from the car’s passenger seat. It was the resident in Room 103, Jin Mitaka the 3rd year.

Jin waved at the car until it was out of sight. And afterwards, he jumped over the gates and landed in the school grounds.

When Jin lifted his head up, he spotted Sorata and Mashiro 3 meters in front of him and approached them while suppressing a yawn.

“So you guys are coming to school on a lovey dovey bicycle ride? How I envy you guys.”

“I thought we were going to die, because a policeman chased us.”

When Jin stopped to talk right in front of them, Sorata noticed a scratch on Jin’s cheek.

“What happened? That wound.”

“Huh? Ah… it was Noriko who scratched me.”

Jin mimicked the scratching action with his fingers tensed. Seeing the action, Sorata frowned. Mashiro looked at Jin’s wound in fascination.

“What did you do to get scratched like that?”

“I hope that girls don’t get so upset when I say another girl’s name while I’m sleep-talking.”

As he said that, Jin started to walk away to the classrooms. Sorata followed suit and dragged Mashiro behind him.

“Doesn’t it hurt?”

“It hurts a lot.”

But Jin was still smiling.

“Even when I asked her what name I said out loud while sleep talking, Noriko wouldn’t tell me. She didn’t even talk in the car, so I was pretty intimidated. Was it Asami? Kana? Or it must’ve been either Meiko, Suzune or Rumi… I really can’t remember. So that’s what happened to me when I was sleeping so peacefully.”

“You must’ve said Misaki-senpai’s name without a doubt.”

“…”

Suddenly, Jin stopped talking. But he quickly recovered to his usual self and flexed his shoulders playfully.

“Really now, Sorata has gotten quite scary.”

“I don’t think that I can sleep over at other people’s houses while getting scratched.”

If anyone else asked Jin that question, Jin would be stuck without an answer.

“I’m still trying to think of a response that will be the ultimate excuse. Got any ideas?”

“It’ll all work out if you just stay quietly in Sakurasou.”

“Well, that’s not too bad.”

Sorata was expecting Jin to scoff over that idea, but he accepted it.

“I won’t be able to sleep over for a while.”

“Did something happen?”

“Huh? Ah… didn’t Misaki tell you?”

If it was something related to Misaki, then it must’ve been something serious.

“Wait, what is it? What are you planning?”

“Nothing really.”

“As if that’s the case! Tell me.”

As they were talking, they reached the shoe lockers. The bell that notified them of the start of semester two rang out. The students around the three of them were hurrying to their classrooms. Jin had already left saying ‘you should hurry as well’ already.

Mashiro was taking her time as usual as she changed into her slippers.

“Hurry up! I’ll leave you behind you know?!”

If they were late, Sorata would be scared for life by Chihiro. And since the normal curriculum students had to go to the right and the arts to the left, Sorata had to go to a different direction from Mashiro.

“Hey Sorata.”

Mashiro grabbed Sorata’s sleeves as he was about to dash off.

“What is it?”

“Where’s my classroom?”

“What?”

What was this person saying.

“Where’s my classroom?”

Mashiro repeated her question.

“How could you forget where your classroom is during the holidays!”

At Sorata’s shout, Mashiro tilted her head to the side.

“Don’t tell me… I need to teach you about the school layout from the beginning…”

“Yes.”

“What do you mean yes!”

And so, the second semester started off with Sorata's deep sighs.

Part 2

The class that he walked into for the first time in 40 days of the summer holidays, was overfilled with its unique disorder.

The classroom was full of students who were talking about their summer holidays as if they were competing against each other. Most of them were complaining about the fact that the second semester was starting, but at the same time, they sounded slightly excited and no one looked like they were actually complaining for real. They were just saying that it was a bother or were just saying it for the sake of it.

They were coming face to face with their reality. After all, they were in their second year of high school, so parting ways with their summer holidays was natural.

It must've been because they were at that age in life, because almost half of Sorata's classmates were talking about their love life.

They were rowdy saying how they went to their middle school class reunion and got to see their crush and get her phone number. Or, on their way home, they were so happy and kicked a pole, breaking their foot in the process, how they still haven't gotten a reply from the previous text, how it was all pointless, a girl told him not to get too friendly with her, and that the text finally came. [5]

Apart from those types of conversations, there were also some gossips where 'someone is going out with so-and-so' or how 'someone became an adult now.' Where did they get all these information from?

And in those rumours, Sakurasou was a great topic to talk about.

"Hey guys, did you hear about it? I heard that Aoyama entered Sakurasou because of Kanda."

She didn't really move in because of Sorata.

"No, that's not it. I heard this from a credible source, but apparently, Kanda said to her「Just follow me」and forcefully dragged her in."

The one who moved in the luggage was Misaki. Who was that credible source in the

first place.

“But you know~ I heard that they share the same room together~. Kya~! Isn’t Nanami so bold?”

Why did the conversation drift that way.

“This is top secret, but I heard that there’s a new life inside her already.”

How is it top secret if you say it out so bluntly… no, how it’s not even true.

“What are you saying!”

Nanami, who’ve had enough, complained.

“Oh? Why aren’t you denying the other points~?”

The classmate didn’t try to go down without resistance.

“N-nothing happened! We live in separate rooms! So please don’t imagine those rude thoughts! W-what are you guys thinking!”

Although Nanami said that and tried to be stern, her face was bright red and her words carried almost no weight.

“Kanda, stop being silent and explain it to them!”

“Ehh~, don’t try to pass it onto me…”

Even if he tried, it wouldn’t do any good against his classmates.

Afterwards, two girls who were close to Nanami… the tall and short-haired girl was Yayoiko Honjo, a member of the softball club, while the other girl with a bob-cut was Mayu Takasaki. Nanami was powerless against the pair’s endless questions. The two of them probably thought that they were allowed to bombard Nanami with questions because of her embarrassed expression.

Apart from rumours about Nanami, other topics related to Sakurasou circulated such as sneaking into the pool at night and swimming naked, or talks about playing with fireworks to blow up the school.

Thanks to those talks, Sorata and Nanami weren't able to rest for the whole day.

"For various reasons, the first day back was too tiring."

As the Sakurasou members sat around the table to have dinner, Nanami complained to them about what happened during the first day.

"So from now, please try to behave appropriately like a normal high school student. Understood?"

Currently, it was seven o'clock at night.

The table was full with six people occupying its seats. In a clockwise order, it was Chihiro, Misaki, Jin, Sorata, Mashiro and Nanami.

On the table, there was grilled fish, some eggplant side dish, cold steamed eggs, rice and miso soup. All the dishes were prepared by Jin.

"Are you all listening?"

Nanami asked in a threatening voice.

"Yes, yes."

Jin answered half-heartedly at her question.

"Answer only once!"

"Yes~."

This time, it was Misaki who replied.

"Don't stretch out your answer!"

Sorata thought that Nanami was doing her best as he brought the grilled fish to his mouth.

Next to him, Mashiro sat there with an expression that said that she didn't consider herself to be related to the problem and was trying to dig out bits of ginko from the steamed eggs dish. She placed the ginko that she'd just dug out onto her spoon and

brought it to Sorata's mouth- motioning him to eat it.

Since he couldn't be bothered to tell her not to do that, Sorata wordlessly ate it. The unique flavour of ginko was released in his mouth. Without caring too much about the spoon, Mashiro ate some steamed eggs with it.

"Shiina, listen well to Nanami."

"Why?"

"She said that we should behave appropriately right? That includes you as well."

"You too, Kanda."

Nanami executed a surprise attack to the unprepared Sorata.

"What? Why me?"

He wasn't expecting that at all.

"Sorata should answer as well."

For some reason, Mashiro looked really proud of herself, while Nanami appeared to be more and more uncomfortable. Knowing that nothing good would come out of arguing with her, Sorata answered without wanting to.

"Fine."

"Not fine, but answer with a yes!"

Watching Nanami nitpicking over small details, Chihiro drank some beer and watched the view with a small smirk. No matter how you looked at it, Nanami was actually doing Chihiro's job instead. Chihiro was supposed to be the teacher in charge of Sakurasou after all.

"I'm so glad that Aoyama is here."

Chihiro spoke from the bottom of her heart and sighed deeply.

"Where can I find some peace and rest…"

Suddenly, Nanami spoke to herself.

“If I find some, I’ll make sure to contact you.”

“Thanks… I’ll be waiting without expecting it.”

It appeared Nanami’s first day back to school left some deep scars on her.

In fact, Sorata suffered the same treatment last year as well. Towards the end of the first semester, he moved into Sakurasou, and by the end of the summer holidays, his world became completely different at school…. He thought that there really was an invisible wall.

“Something good will happen soon.”

“I hope so too.”

Nanami looked at Sorata with great expectancy and Sorata, who didn’t understand her at all, extended some eggplant to her.

“… Do you want some?”

“…”

She wordlessly reached out for it with her chopsticks and started to chew on a piece unhappily.

It seemed like he made the wrong choice. He should’ve given her some steamed eggs instead.

Taking advantage of Sorata’s unawareness, Misaki stole the last piece.

“Ah~ what are you doing, senpai.”

Misaki consumed it with a satisfied expression.

“It’s cheating to give it only to Nanami. Everyone is born equally!”

“If you’re going to talk about equal treatment, include me in it as well! And aliens don’t count!”

“But I believe that Kohai-kun doesn’t expect any equivalent love.”

“I’m going to stop being a nice guy!”

“Don’t get so tight assed over a side dish, Sorata.”

“What do you know, sensei?”

“Kanda. If there are no side dishes, then you can just have rice.”

“Don’t talk like Antoinette!” [6]

To do what Chihiro had suggested, Sorata stood up with his rice bowl- to fill himself up with rice at least. But as he did, the door bell rang to notify them of a guest.

The gaze of everyone around the table fell on Sorata.

“Fine, I’ll go.”

In one way or another, Sorata knew that he was the one who had to check, so he obediently went to the door.

Slipping on his slippers, Sorata opened the front door.

At that instant, the view lighted up brightly and he had to squint to try to see.

There was a girl there. With golden hair that shone under the moonlight. Her eyes were transparent blue that was reminiscent of the southern oceans. Her soft looking cheeks were slightly raised in a warm smile.

“Hello. I’m sorry for dropping by so suddenly.”

Just by looking at her and hearing her voice, Sorata quickly blushed. His heart started to beat faster.

The blouse that she was wearing was tight around her, emphasizing the big valleys and the slim waist. She wore a chequered pleated skirt. It was almost like a school uniform. She gave off the feeling of gentleness and pureness.

“Um~.”

She was probably older than him. To express her in a word, she was a beauty. And she didn’t appear to be from the southern islands either.

At the unexpected guest, Sorata’s brain ceased to function.

“Are you lost for words at my appearance?”

The girl playfully laughed to help Sorata feel at ease.

She was speaking fluent Japanese. Even though she was, Sorata said,

“I can not speak Engrish!” [7]

After saying that purely out of reflex, he closed the door without thinking.

“Haa~ what was that about.”

He wiped away at his non-existent sweat from his forehead.

But the door opened again from the outside.

Looking up at Sorata, the blonde beauty was still smiling.

“I’m quite confident with my Japanese… you can understand me can’t you?”

“I’m sorry. I’m not confident with my English, so I panicked.”

“You’re a funny person.”

She covered her mouth and laughed elegantly. Her speech and her actions were very polite.

“Thank you for your compliment.”

“I wasn’t really complimenting you.”

“I actually knew that you were teasing me.”

“…”

“…”

An awkward silence fell between them.

“That aside, could you please call Mashiro out for me?”

“Sure, but may I ask who you are?”

She didn't appear to be a bad person, but he had to check to make sure.

"I apologize. My name is Rita Ainsworth."

It was a name that Sorata heard of before.

"Shiina's roommate?"

"Yes, I'm that Rita."

She brightly smiled.

If it's Ainsworth, then it's the same name as Mashiro's teacher's name.

Could it be a coincidence.

While he was wondering about it, Mashiro came out to the front door.

"Sorata, what's going on?"

As soon as Mashiro spotted Rita, she opened her eyes wide.

"Rita is here!"

"Mashiro!"

As soon as Mashiro heard her name, a big smile appeared on her usual expressionless face. Even though she was barefooted, she ran towards Rita's chest. The two of them hugged each other tightly to confirm that they were actually together.

Mashiro rested her head on Rita's shoulders and closed her eyes peacefully. She looked like a cat that didn't show any feelings to others except for its own kin. That's what it looked like to Sorata.

"I'm glad that you appear to be healthy."

Rita pulled away from the embrace.

"Hmm, Rita too."

Misaki, Jin and Nanami came out from the kitchen, wondering what was going on.

“Wow~ it’s a doll.”

When Misaki commented first about Rita, Jin followed suit.

“She’s a real beauty. Who is she?”

Nanami wordlessly looked at Rita, Sorata and then looked straight at Mashiro.

Shortly afterwards, Chihiro also came to the front door while holding a can of beer in her hand.

“So, who’s the visitor, Kanda… hmm? Oh, is that you, Rita?”

“Long time no see. I hope you’ve been well, Chihiro.”

Sorata glanced at Chihiro to ask if she knew Rita with his eyes, but Chihiro didn’t reply. She returned to the kitchen saying that she drank all her beer.

Sorata thought to himself, since Chihiro and Mashiro were cousins, it wouldn’t be strange for her to know Rita.

“So, why did you come Rita?”

At Mashiro’s question, Rita’s eyes changed. Sorata didn’t know the meaning of the change. He didn’t know, but he could feel the tense atmosphere that Rita was giving off.

He felt uneasy for some reason. If she came all the way from England to see Mashiro, then she should’ve contacted first. What was the reason for Rita’s visit? Mashiro didn’t know that Rita was even coming. Neither did Chihiro.

“Cinderella’s magic has worn off.”

Mashiro tilted her head in a puzzled manner.

“To say it in a Japanese style, I came here from the Moon to bring back Princess Kaguya.[8]”

That was enough for Sorata to arrive at an answer. He knew the reason for Rita’s visit. He tensed up subconsciously. He could feel Jin and Nanami’s movement behind his back as well.

The only one who didn't understand was Mashiro.

"What do you mean?"

Rita sighed and looked at Mashiro determinedly.

"You're coming back with me to England right now."

"Right now?"

The owner of the surprised voice was none other than Sorata. Nanami muttered 'why so suddenly' as well.

Rita glanced at Sorata for a moment and continued to talk to Mashiro.

"Your work has been featured in the magazine, so your parents have realised that you went to Japan to become a mangaka."

This time, Sorata was unable to speak. It wasn't that it was unexpected, but when faced with the reality of it, he felt an immense amount of pressure. He could almost hear his own joints creak and give off unpleasant sounds.

"Mashiro, so your parents are against it?"

Nanami whispered into her ear. All she did was nod her head.

"I won't go."

"I knew Mashiro would say that."

"…"

"But consider it one more time. About how you hold so much potential. You'll be someone who will leave a mark in the history of mankind with your paintings. Your hands are so valuable and it can create so many great works."

Sorata almost said 'to say that she would go down in history. Isn't that over exaggerating', but what came out of his mouth was just a whine that no one could hear.

It wasn't something to be laughing about. Rita spoke about leaving a mark in history without any hesitation. And Mashiro wasn't denying it either. She was listening like it

was something obvious.

Sorata felt so distant from Mashiro who was looking at Rita expressionlessly. Everyone there must've felt the same way as him. No one dared to interrupt the two.

Mashiro didn't say anything, and it was impossible to tell what she was thinking. She didn't stop looking at Rita.

"Try to think back. Think about those people who shed tears as they were emotionally moved by your paintings in the gallery. They're waiting for you to come back. They are waiting for your next work. Please respond to their feelings."

"Why are you saying those things."

"It's not something to be taken lightly about. This is very important."

"Becoming a mangaka, Rita cheered on for me."

As she said that, Mashiro looked away for the first time. In a dejected manner…

"That's…"

Rita looked down as well. Her pupils were out of focus as she muttered something.

"That was just what Mashiro thought. I never cheered on for you before."

"… Rita."

"I don't want to see you wasting your talent on something like manga. Please, come back to England with me."

Rita grabbed Mashiro's hand pleadingly.

"I'm not going."

Mashiro slipped her hand out of Rita's.

"Your parents might come to Japan anytime soon. If they do, they'll take care of all the paperwork with your current school and enroll you in an English one whether you like it or not. So please, think over it once more. Make the decision for yourself and come back with me."

“Rita, go back by yourself.”

“I won’t go back until you say that you’ll come back with me, Mashiro!”

“Go.”

While clenching her teeth, Mashiro stretched out her hands and pushed Rita out of the house. Rita had an oblivious expression. Everyone there just saw something that was so unexpected.

“Mashiro!”

Ignoring Rita’s yells, Mashiro closed the door. She locked the padlock as well. She was still looking down.

“Wait! Please hear me out! Mashiro!”

Rita slammed on the door two or three times. All that could be heard was the knocking sounds.

Without a sound, Mashiro headed upstairs.

“Hey, Shiina.”

Sorata followed her to the stairs, but his voice didn’t reach her. The sound of a door slamming shut could be heard upstairs.

“What should we do?”

“Should we really do anything? Let that Rita girl be.”

“How cold, Aoyama.”

“So Kanda is on her side.”

“Now isn’t the time to talk about sides.”

He walked down the stairs and returned to the front door. Outside had gone quiet again.

“I know well enough about other people being against my dreams and goals.”

As Nanami said that, she lifted her head up and forcefully smiled. After all, Nanami's father was against her becoming a voice actress. Usually, she acted like it wasn't a problem at all, but in the end, she was concerned about it.

It must be the same for Mashiro. She showed a side of her that no one could've imagined that day. Sorata had never seen her being concerned about what anyone thought of her or even seen her going against someone. Mashiro had always lived her life her own way. So that's why he thought that Mashiro was unshakable. So that's why he thought that Mashiro wouldn't be deterred by someone… because Mashiro always focused on her goal no matter how people thought of her.

But he was probably mistaken because he didn't know how Mashiro truly felt.

One thing was certain. And that was that there was a person who could affect Mashiro. That person was the girl named Rita Ainsworth, not Sorata…

"I'll see how Mashiro is doing."

Nanami went up the stairs. As Sorata tried to follow, Jin stopped him by grabbing onto his shoulder.

"If you're still unsure, then give it up."

"…"

He couldn't speak.

"If you go up while still unsure of it yourself, you would probably be against Mashiro doing manga as well. Don't you think that Mashiro wouldn't want that?"

Sorata's feet wouldn't move. It meant that he acknowledged what Jin had just said. So he decided to leave Mashiro to Nanami.

"Why do you look so down, Kohai-kun! Mashiron already said that she won't go back."

Even after hearing Misaki's words, his heart was still clouded.

He was actually feeling afraid after hearing Rita's words, and he couldn't press down his feelings. He knew that Mashiro was a genius, but he didn't view her as a person to leave a mark in history.

What would it feel like to have people admiring your work even after hundreds of years since your death? He couldn't imagine it. He couldn't express it in words. He couldn't even feel it. Although he couldn't even begin to imagine what it would feel like, he knew that it was something amazing. So he could only be unsure.

"I don't want you to think useless thoughts and make the situation worse. Aoyama might not be, but who's side are you on, Sorata?"

"I'm on the justice side!"

Misaki threw an uppercut towards the ceiling.

"I'm just…"

"She's an evil witch who's here to steal away the princess. Am I wrong?"

The answer was obvious. It was clearly there.

But it was too late now. Sorata's heart started to waver. Was it really ok for Mashiro not to return to the artistic world…

Part 3

Having no appetite because of all the worries that he had, Sorata decided not to eat any more and locked himself in his room as soon as he took care of his dishes.

To have a change of mood, Sorata started studying about programming. After looking at some theories, he committed himself to a practice question. Each time he wrote a source code and executed it, an error message popped up. So after many tries, he wasn't able to solve a single question.

He couldn't concentrate at all. Soon enough, he started to execute source codes even when he knew that there were errors in there somewhere.

He looked at the clock. It was already nearly midnight.

If he didn't sleep soon, tomorrow would be a hard day on him.

Before going to sleep, he headed towards the kitchen to drink some water. On his way back to his room, his footsteps naturally stopped at the front door.

In the end, Rita didn't come back. Did she have a place to stay? Did she eat anything? Did she have money? What if she was wrapped up in some trouble in a foreign country like this? She could speak Japanese well, but things were probably different here than England. And… with her appearance, she would attract dirty looks from those types of men.

When Sorata started to think about all those things, the ideas flowed in.

"Ahh, damn it!"

Sorata hurriedly slipped on his slippers and went outside. 'It can't be helped since I'm worried about her.' He tried giving himself that excuse, but he knew it deep inside his heart. He wasn't doing this because he was worried about Rita, but because he had things that he had to ask her.

He didn't know where Rita would go. So he decided to head towards the station first.

While thinking about what he should do, he stepped onto the street but sensed someone

nearby. That someone was none other than Rita, who was crouched down while leaning against the brick wall.

At Sorata's sudden appearance, she looked up in surprise with teary eyes.

"You're late…. You're too late. You're so late. I got bitten by mosquitoes…"

She was scratching her white leg and looked up at him with a disapproving expression.

"What do you mean late… did we make a promise or something?"

"It's obvious for a guy to save a damsel in distress."

Maybe what she said wasn't that surprising because it was natural.

After apologising, Sorata extended his hands to Rita. She grabbed his hands and Sorata pulled her up.

"Anyhow, do you have a place to stay, Rita-san?"

だ～
……へ～

“I don’t.”

“What about food.”

“I didn’t have any.”

Just to prove it, Rita’s stomach let out a cute growl.

“That just now, was… to say that my stomach’s empty.”

She looked away embarrassedly.

“It’s the same in our country, so you don’t need to explain it to me.”

“Why don’t you tell me your name?”

“My name is Sorata Kanda.”

“How old are you?”

“I’m sixteen years old. I’m the same age as Shiina.”

“So we’re the same age. I thought you were younger because you looked cute.”

“I thought Rita-san was older because you looked mature.”

It was too hard to tell a foreigner’s age by their looks.

“Please call me Rita, Sorata.”

She probably meant that she’ll talk more informally with him.

“And please, you don’t need to speak so formally with me.”

It looks like she wasn’t going to speak informally with him.

Rita continued to smile naturally. Sorata thought that she looked great while smiling.

“A-anyways, come inside.”

Sorata motioned Rita into the house.

After inviting Rita into the dorm, Sorata served a late dinner for her in the kitchen. The food was all consumed as soon it was served- probably because she was hungry or because Jin's cooking was delicious. Maybe it was both. She finished off three bowls of rice and still wanted some more. It was questionable where all that food goes to in Rita's body. [9]

After she finished eating, Sorata lead her to the shower and while she was in there, he tried to find somewhere Rita could sleep in. If the circumstances allowed it, she could've slept in Mashiro's room, but because of what had happened, it would be awkward for them to share the room.

Nanami must've been sleeping, since she didn't answer when he knocked her door.

When he peeked inside Misaki's room, it was messy with papers and drawings, so it was impossible for someone else to sleep inside. It was actually possible for the floor to break and fall onto Sorata's room just below. Even so, Misaki said,

"Of course Ritan is welcome to sleep here!"

And she started to set up some bedding on top of all the mess, so Sorata politely refused. It would be bad if Rita thought of Japan as a strange country. After all, Misaki was seen to be a strange person even on a galactic level.

When he went to the caretaker's room while betting on his last hope, Chihiro poked her head out and said,

"If you picked up a pet, then take care of it yourself. I'm not your mother."

"Yes, you're right~."

So he was one hit KO-ed.

The only remaining rooms were Jin- the king of sleepover's and Ryuunosuke's room- which was never open. But those two were out of the question for obvious reasons.

So Sorata returned to his room and laid down a new bed sheet. He also picked up the magazines and stacked them to take up minimal space.

As he did, Rita walked in after she had showered.

For some reason, she only had a bath towel around her, and her slightly pink shoulders looked too sexy.

“Why don’t you have your clothes on?”

“I don’t have any clothes to change into, so could you lend me some Sorata?”

“What? Why don’t you have any clothes?”

“Because I didn’t bring any.”

“Why?”

“I was planning on returning almost straight away, and I thought that I could borrow Mashiro’s clothes for 2 or 3 days.”

Now that he thought about it, he realised that she wasn’t carrying any luggage.

“So you came here empty handed? How brave of you.”

Rita hunched down and pretended not to hear him.

“Please don’t keep looking at me like that. It’s embarrassing.”

“S-sorry!”

Sorata quickly averted his gaze and reached out for the laundry on the curtain rails. He didn’t know if he could lend the clothes to Rita without Mashiro’s permission, but since he couldn’t make her wear boys clothes, he passed Mashiro’s pyjamas and panties to her.

“Are these Sorata’s?”

“If those were mine, then I would be a massive pervert. Those are Shiina’s.”

He stepped out of his room while Rita was getting changed.

“Then… is Sorata Mashiro’s boyfriend?”

Rita spoke on the other side of the door.

“I’m not.”

“Then… it means that you couldn’t resist your build up of lust while living with your crush under the same roof.”

“I think you should know that Shiina isn’t capable of doing anything for herself to survive, if you were her roommate.”

“I see. So Sorata is on「Mashiro Duty」in Japan.”

“What? You have that in England as well?”

“Thanks to that, nobody wanted to share rooms with Mashiro. And you can come in now.”

When he walked back in, Rita was fully dressed and sat on the centre on the bed. Although she was wearing the pyjamas that Sorata was quite used to seeing, it was tighter on Rita and it gave off a completely different feeling. The buttons weren’t done up to the top and thanks to the two free buttons, her beautiful cleavage was visible. It was better than having a towel around her, but the destructiveness of her pyjama-clad figure was fearsome.

“Is this Sorata’s room?”

“T-that’s right. There are no other rooms available, so please put up with it.”

“This is my first time being inside a boy’s room, so I’m getting excited.”

“I’m getting nervous!”

Rita looked around the room with an interested expression. She was most definitely thinking that there were so many cats in the room, or the drawings on the walls were strange or she could’ve been judging Sorata.

The looks in her eyes changed when she was inspecting the drawings on the wall.

“Half of it was drawn by Mashiro.”

“So you can tell just by looking at it.”

“Since I did live with her in my grandfather’s house ever since we were six years old.”

It seemed like the name Ainsworth wasn't just a coincidence.

"So you paint as well, Rita?"

When Sorata asked the question to lead the conversation, Rita turned her head away.

"I don't anymore… I quit painting."

For a moment, she appeared to be hurt and scared. Sorata wanted confirm his suspicion, so he asked again.

"How come?"

When he asked, Rita twirled around, put her index finger to her lips and smiled.

"Women are mysterious creatures, so I can't tell you."

Feeling that bombarding her with a bunch of questions would be rude, Sorata decided to call it a night. He could always ask more about it later.

"Sleep on the bed; I've changed the bed sheets as well."

Currently, the seven cats were huddled together and shared the same expression- saying that the bed was their territory. Since they weren't going to be generous and move, Rita would have to put up with them.

"I'll sleep in the kitchen then."

As Sorata tried to walk out, he was stopped by Rita's voice behind him.

"I can't chase out the owner of this room and sleep here by myself. Other English people would scold me for being rude."

"I don't think like that on an international sense, so don't worry about it."

"Anyhow, please sleep here as well, Sorata."

"Umm, you see. I'm a perfectly healthy male… are you sure it's ok?"

"Is Sorata like a wolf?"

Rita asked without a hint of concern.

“If I had the opportunity, I would like to…”

How can a man behave like Jin? How can he cross that line? Sorata still couldn’t figure it out. [10]

“It doesn’t really matter with me, so please sleep with me.”

“What? With you?”

“I meant it as sleeping together in the same room…. But does Sorata want something more than that?”

“W-what are you saying. Don’t be silly!”

Rita laughed like it was funny while looking at Sorata’s blushing face. It looks like she was just kidding.

“Please restrain your lust. Promise me that you won’t suddenly turn into a wolf?”

“That’s almost a torture, so I’ll just sleep in the kitchen.”

It was pretty clear that that was the better option for both of them.

“If Sorata sleeps in the kitchen, then I’ll sleep there as well.”

Sorata decided that it was impossible to persuade her, so he decided to give up.

So instead, he laid down on the floor while using a cushion as a pillow.

“I’ll sleep on the floor, so Sorata can use the bed...”

“I don’t want to get back up.”

Rita let out a low moan and looked down on him. Beyond her voluptuous chest, her slightly troubled eyes were visible. The sight wasn’t a joy to the eyes, but poisonous instead.

Sorata turned over his body and turned his back on Rita.

“Sorata is a nice person. I think that’s why you’re so shy.”

Although he couldn’t understand how those two thoughts were connected, he didn’t

press on any further.

Reaching out for the string-type switch for the light, Sorata turned off the light.

Rita continued to say things, but Sorata paid no attention to her.

Not long after closing his eyes to sleep, he felt a cat rubbing against his body. Judging by the texture of its chin, it seemed to be the calico cat Kodama.

“Kya! Don’t, stop it please… it’s ticklish.”

It looks like Rita was under attack as well.

Sorata tried to sleep, but he didn’t feel sleepy. His head was still clear. It was probably because there was a girl right next to him. There was that reason, but he knew that that wasn’t all.

Rita’s words were still inside Sorata’s heart.

- A painting that would leave a mark on history.

If it’s Mashiro, she would be able to paint something like that. She certainly had the potential.

He looked up at the ceiling in the dark. His eyes were accustomed to the dark now. Rita was probably still awake, and the sounds of her breathing could be heard.

“I think you have something to ask me?”

Rita spoke to him first.

“That’s why you came to find me, isn’t it?”

She could already read Sorata like a book.

“Is Shiina really that great?”

“…”

“Since I don’t know too much about art.”

“…”

“Ehh? Are you sleeping? That’s amazing.”

“Please understand, even slightly.”

“Understand what?”

“About my feelings, having to answer about Mashiro’s… skills.”

Her voice was clear as a bell and her voice or her tone was the same as before, but Sorata could feel the atmosphere of the room tensing.

He didn’t know the reason, but he realized that he had asked a forbidden question.

And his question must’ve been the reason why Rita looked hurt before- without realizing it…. That was all that he knew for now.

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s cheating to apologize without knowing the reason.”

“I’m sorry about that as well.”

Rita silently smiled.

“I’ll forgive you for today.”

“… Thank you.”

“And I’ll tell you the reason, just for today.”

“Never mind, I won’t hear it.”

“No… I think it would be better for you to know about it. I realized that just now.”

How did she mean? Sorata thought about it, but didn’t ask.

“Mashiro is so overwhelming.”

“You mean…”

Not understanding what she meant, Sorata asked thoughtlessly. And he regretted asking her about it, straight away.

“In a sense that I wished that she would… disappear.”

Even in this situation, Rita’s tone was unchanged. That made Sorata even feel worse about it, and it drove him in an endless maze. Sorata couldn’t even begin to understand what Rita meant….

Since he didn’t know if he should laugh about it and take it as a joke or be quiet and wait for her words, Sorata could only clench down on his lips.

“Please be careful as well, Sorata.”

“About what?”

“You’ll be broken if you stay close to Mashiro. Just like me…”

“I see…”

He could only respond like that.

It seemed like there was a hidden darkness deep inside Rita’s heart. Her heart was like an impossibly big maze, and Sorata shouldn’t have stepped inside so carelessly. He didn’t know what would happen to him if he got lost in that maze. That’s how powerful Rita’s words were.

“But don’t worry. I’ll be taking back Mashiro… for sure.”

Neither Sorata nor Rita spoke any further. They could only hope to fall asleep on that sleepless night.

The next day, Sorata opened his eyes with a great weight on his body. He thought that the cats were on him, but he was wrong.

It was Rita, who had fallen off the bed, on top of his body.

The volume of her fleshiness was comparable to Misaki’s and it was enough to make Sorata feel bewildered. To be honest, the fullness was incomparable to Mashiro’s

“Rita, wake up! My lust is just about to be released!”

“Hmm~ what is it. So noisy.”

She was still half asleep.

Mistaking Sorata as an alarm clock, she slapped his face a few times as if she was turning him off.

Sorata squirmed under Rita, trying to free himself.

At that moment, someone knocked on the door.

“Kanda, it’s already past eight, so will you be ok? Are you even awake?”

It was Nanami’s voice.

“I-I’m fine! I’m awake!”

“It’s really~ noise.”

Rita suddenly looked towards the door and started to speak with it while being still asleep.

“Hey, what are you doing?”

“That’s what I should be saying, Kanda! Why can I hear a girl’s voice!”

Nanami slammed the door open.

Behind her was Mashiro, who was already in her school uniform. Nanami must’ve awakened her up and dressed her.

What the pair saw before them was Sorata and Rita who looked like they were wrestling.

“Good morning.”

Although Sorata greeted Nanami coolly, Nanami responded to him with a chilly glare that froze his body to the core.

“I can understand that you let her sleep over out of a compassionate heart, but it seems like you two have gotten awfully close together overnight.”

“T-that’s not it! If you’re going to blame something, then blame Rita’s bad sleeping habits!”

Expecting a backlash, Sorata barely got up after pushing Rita's face aside.

"Heh~ so you're so close to her, you're even saying her name so easily."

He regretted it straight away, but it was too late.

"Sorata is on Rita's side?"

Mashiro's eyes stared straight at Sorata.

He was about to say no, but Rita clung onto his arm and interrupted him.

"That's right."

Sorata's left arm was being happily sandwiched between Rita's breasts.

"Whoa!"

When Sorata yelped with a crackling voice,

"Uuu!"

"Ehh."

Nanami and Mashiro looked at him objectionably.

"You were gentle with me last night though."

"Don't say things that will cause a deadly misunderstanding!"

"Kanda, for every single time!"

Nanami's clenched fist was shaking.

"I'm just get caught up in these unlucky situations!"

"Even when you're dying from happiness right now…"

Her eyes were checking over Rita's chest, butt and thighs.

"Rita, get away from Sorata."

Said Mashiro coldly.

“Why should I?”

“You don’t need a reason, so get away from him.”

Rita clung onto him even tighter.

“If you say that you’ll return back to England, Mashiro, then I’ll let go of him.”

At Rita’s words, Mashiro looked at Sorata again.

“Sorata is an enemy.”

“I’m not!”

“You’re so mean, even after spending the night together.”

“What are you saying!”

“But Sorata thinks that Mashiro should be active in the artistic world as well.”

“No, that’s…”

Peeking around out of the corners of his eyes, Sorata thought he saw Mashiro being slightly upset. But it could just be his mistake, since it was only her eyes that were slightly shaking.

At that moment, Rita delivered the final hit.

“You were actually thinking about it weren’t you?”

“T- that’s u-umm…”

Sorata started to stutter after being asked so suddenly.

“I decided to stay in Sorata’s room until Mashiro come back to England with me.”

“What? Without even asking about it with me?”

Sorata was only going let her sleep in his room for a night.

“Alright. Do whatever you want.”

After speaking, Mashiro fled the room.

“Ah, wait! Mashiro!”

And Nanami followed after her.

Just in time, Misaki and Jin poked their heads in through the door.

“Congratulations, Kohai-kun! So you’ve finally become an adult! I speak blessings unto you!”

“I’ll return the title King of Shot-downs back to you. Take care of the rest, Sorata.”

After the pair fanned the flames, they quickly went to school.

Even Chihiro came to the room and said something.

“Kanda, I’ve thought this for a while, but you’re really annoying.”

“Sensei, that’s got nothing to do with the situation right now!”

Of course, Chihiro didn’t say anything further and walked away from his room.

Even when Sorata tried to follow her, he couldn’t move an inch because of Rita holding onto him.

Then Mashiro came back. She was hugging a pillow in her chest.

Without stopping, she came into Sorata’s room and laid down the pillow that she’d just brought, on his bed.

“What are you doing?”

“I’ll be home-staying here.”

“Why would you home-stay here! And you don’t even use a pillow in the first place!”

He gave back the pillow.

“But Rita is.”

“Her situation is completely different.”

“I don’t really mind. I can chat with her before we sleep, so I’m all for it.”

“This is my room! Please let me decide!”

Nanami also came back, slightly later than Mashiro. She was also hiding something behind her back.

No, she wasn’t hiding it. It was Nanami’s personal cushion Torajiro.

“Then me too…”

“Aoyama, please remain as a normal human being! Please, I’m begging you!”

“O-of course I’m joking. It was a joke. I was joking. It was a joke no matter how you see it.”

“Don’t say it four times!”

“A-anyhow! We’ll discuss whether we’re letting Rita-san stay or not in a Sakurasou meeting!”

“Sorata will agree with it, won’t you?”

Rita pressed onto him.

“Sorata’s an idiot!”

Mashiro started to lift her pillow up high and swung around with it at Sorata. Thinking that it was dangerous, Sorata protected Rita out of reflex, but that was a wrong decision.

Mashiro clenched her fists and was holding something back. And she grabbed Nanami’s hand and tried to leave the room wordlessly.

“Ah, wait, Mashiro! Don’t pull me!”

Soon, Nanami’s voice became further away.

When the storm had calmed down, Sorata let out a sigh. Rita who was still clinging onto his arm appeared to be glad as well.

Why did it happen, first thing in the morning…

"Uh, Rita-san. Please let me go now."

"I'm indebted to you in many ways. Let me repay you with my body."

"Do you even know what you're saying?"

"I'm very confident about my body, so please count at least 10000 yen per sexual act."

"Don't say things that are actually probable! Why is the cost so realistic! Actually, you don't need to force yourself at all! Your legs are wobbling, so you're actually forcing yourself aren't you?"

Sorata was reaching his limits as well. He wasn't sure if he could put up with this hellish torture for any longer. It felt like his self-control had escaped to the Andromeda Galaxy.

"I got found out. I've been asked out before, but I don't actually have any experience when it comes to being close to a male."

Rita gave an excuse and finally let Sorata go.

His head was in pain, not physically, but mentally… no, now it was starting to be physically as well.

"Sigh~."

All of his strength left from his upper body, and he hung his head low.

But suddenly, he sensed someone in front of him.

"Why is it so rowdy this morning? Is this a zoo with all its animals in heat?"

There was someone's feet near the door.

The person was wearing school pants. Hence, the person was a male. Jin had already gone outside, and the speaker didn't sound anything like Jin.

Actually, it was a voice that Sorata hadn't heard for months.

Slowly, Sorata looked up. Thin legs, slim figure, pale skin and a boyish face. The

person standing there was a boy, whose hair extended all the way down to his waist.

“W-w-what! Whoa! You’re!”

“Are you dumb!”

“I’m not! B-but, you, are you a projection?”

“I hope the technology for it get’s optimised for everyday life.”

“Or a robot?”

“With them, the day that Maid becomes complete isn’t too far away.”

“Then the real Akasaka?”

The last time Sorata saw him was before the spring break. Approximately 5 months ago. But Ryuunosuke’s attitude was no different to someone greeting another person like they meet every day.

“Kanda, hurry up. We’re going to be late.”

Ryuunosuke disappeared from Sorata’s door and toward the end of the hallway. It seemed like he was going to school.

“Don’t just pop out of no-where after waiting for a good time to come out like it’s nothing!”

Sorata yelled out with all his might to release his stress of being overwhelmed with the confusion and Ryuunosuke’s sudden appearance.

9th of September.

That day, during the lunch break, there was an emergency Sakurasou meeting. The bloodthirsty discussion continued throughout the lunch break and well into the 5th period as well. The following was the discussion outcome and the log.

— With four votes for and three votes against, Rita Ainsworth will be staying shortly at Sakurasou. Everyone, please get along with her. Recorded by- Sorata Kanda

— Sorata is an idiot. Sorata is an idiot. Idiot. Idiot. Idiot. Idiot. Idiot. Idiot. Idiot. Idiot. Idiot. Idiot. Idiot. Idiot. Idiot. Idiot. Idiot. Idiot. Recorded by- Mashiro Shiina

— Sorata is a pervert! Recorded by- Nanami Aoyama

— So Sorata-sama likes big ones. I will scorn you. Recorded by- Maid-chan

— Everyone get along! No, please get along. Recorded by- Sorata Kanda.

Chapter 2 - Let's Think About Peace

Part 1

How can people become closer?

What is peace?

Currently, it was the fourth period, when the grumbling noise from Sorata's stomach wouldn't stop. He stared blankly at the clouds and thought about the eternal task of humanity.

In front of the blackboard, their Modern Society teacher Koharu Shiroyama was singing a lullaby that could put even a crying baby to sleep, with a sweet voice. There were five students who had already given up on resisting and were sprawled out on their tables. There were even more students who were pretending to write notes on their books, but were asleep. The entire classroom was in a state of laziness. This was what always happened after a week of returning back to school.

The first semester was no different as well.

Except for just one thing…

The scratching sound of the chalk hitting the blackboard could be heard. Koharu actually has a great handwriting that didn't match her face or her voice. There were also sounds of someone sleeping behind Sorata. He must have been in a great mood. On top of that, there were also sounds of some keyboard clacking.

Koharu had been glancing around the room for the source of the sound for a while now, and most of the awake students in class, including Sorata, were nervous. They were regretting not falling asleep any earlier. It was just moments until Koharu exploded.

Sorata glanced at Nanami out of the corners of his eyes. She was sitting up straight and was taking down notes with a serious face. From her expression, it looked like she was concentrating hard on the lesson, but one mustn't be tricked by that. When people are feeling annoyed, they tend not to let their true feeling surface. And that was what Nanami was doing right now. The atmosphere around her was tense. If someone bothered her, she would snap. The reason why she was feeling annoyed was Sorata's and the person producing the keyboard clacking sounds' fault.

Nanami had been in this mood ever since Rita started to stay at Sakurasou a week ago.

Even today when Sorata tried to talk to her,

“Good morning, Aoyama.”

“Hey.”

“Uhh, you know.”

“If you want to chat with someone, then why don’t you talk to Rita.”

And so, thanks to her cold reply, Sorata wasn’t able to strike up a conversation. Even a father and his daughter in her teenage years would talk more than this.

Sorata sort of knew why Nanami was angry, but he didn’t at the same time. She was probably angry that Sorata was letting Rita stay at Sakurasou, but he didn’t understand why she was so upset about it.

But Nanami was actually behaving better than someone, and the one that Sorata was actually concerned about was Mashiro. She must’ve been upset that Sorata refused to let her stay in his room, so she’s been continuously ignoring Sorata.

“Shiina, it’s morning. Wake up.”

When he went to her room to wake her up,

“Sorata is an idiot.”

She replied oddly.

“Shiina, time to eat~.”

When he told her to eat,

“Sorata is an idiot.”

She answered with originality.

“Shiina, someone’s calling you.”

When he told her,

“Sorata is an idiot.”

She greeted the phone like that. Mashiro was probably determined to tell everyone in the world that Sorata was an idiot.

Even when their eyes met by coincidentally

“Boo.”

She tried to threaten him like a wild animal that’s chasing off another animal from its territory.

Those actions continuously hurt Sorata’s heart each time like a small thorn. It was quite painful to be treated that way by a girl that you like. In fact, it was almost depressing.

The root of Sorata’s troubles, Rita, was freeloading in Sakurasou while staying in Sorata’s room with a big smile. She was already friendly not only with Chihiro who she knew before, but Jin and Misaki as well.

Instead of a morning greeting, Jin greeted her with,

“Rita is pretty today as well.”

When greeted like that, Rita replied,

“Yes, I hear that a lot.”

And she often answered with a smile.

Even this morning,

“Should we go on a date next time?”

“I’m sorry, I’ve got my time booked with enough dates for the next 10 years.”

“Then after 10 years, I’ll book all of your time.”

“That sounds like a proposal.”

“You can think of it like that.”

“If we feel the same way even after 10 years, then I’ll consider it.”

And they were enjoying chatting like that.

With Misaki, Rita got close to her since Misaki always came to Sorata’s room to play games. Rita had never held a game controller, just like Mashiro, but her level of understanding was quite high, so she got used to playing almost any types of game fairly quickly.

The most amazing thing though, was that Rita wasn’t put off by Misaki’s extreme actions or speech. She didn’t complain about the nickname 「Ritan」, and she actually laughed off Misaki’s alien-like behaviors.

“Now then, let’s start 「Phrases that you want to say at least once in life Shiritori[11]」~!”

“Hold on, senpai. We’re already playing a game right now! Wager the shopping duty for tomorrow!”

“Then I’ll start. 「I’ll give you half of the world!」. You need to continue with 「D」 Ritan.”

“Me? I see. 「Drive after that car right now!」. So Sorata should follow with an 「W」.”

“What? Me? 「W」, 「W」… 「Which would you like to hear first. The good news or the bad news.」. It’s your turn with 「S」, Misaki-senpai!”

“「Stop spouting nonsense, you should only sleep talk when you’re asleep.」. Continue with 「P」, Ritan.”

“「Please welcome Rita Ainsworth.」. It’s Sorata’s turn with 「H」.”

“「Hurry up and write down the required money on the empty cheque.」. Start with 「E」, senpai!”

“「’Ey, you don’t need to come out from tomorrow.」 Ritan with 「W」, right?”

“「… Wrong! That part isn’t in the text book at all!」Sorata, start with 「L」.”

“The two just now was against the rules wasn’t it?[12]”

This happened last night, and it was pretty clear that Rita is getting along with some of the other Sakurasou members.

Also, Rita was obeying the rule of 'those who do not work shall not eat' and was helping around the dorm with cleaning, laundry and grocery shopping.

"You look surprised, Sorata."

"I didn't think of you to be the type who's cleaned before."

"Don't forget that I was Mashiro's roommate before."

When Sorata heard that simple explanation for it, he understood it quickly. Mashiro was hopeless when it came to housework, so the roommate had to take care of everything.

If there was something wrong with Rita, it would be that she had a bad sleeping habit. Even after Sorata left his room every night, since it was dangerous to sleep with Rita in the same room, she must've rolled off the bed because she didn't have a refreshed expression each morning.

However, when Rita spotted Sorata sleeping in the kitchen every morning,

"Sorata has a bad sleeping habit."

And smiled as she said that.

Seeing her everyday life like that, Sorata almost forgot why she was here. Sorata had to remind himself that Rita was actually here to drag Mashiro back to England. However, over the past week, Rita hasn't done anything noteworthy to take Mashiro back to England.

Rita was getting treated the same way as Sorata by Mashiro, but she didn't seem to be bothered by it and smiled all the time- so it was hard to tell if she was actually going to take Mashiro back.

The previous day, Sorata even ended up asking Rita.

"Hey, this isn't something that I should be asking, but are you sure that you don't need to persuade her?"

When he asked, Rita answered back quite simply.

“Right now, nothing will get through Mashiro. Prodding her right now will actually work against me, so the best thing to do right now, is to wait.”

At her exact analysis, Sorata sighed. That was because Sorata asked Rita that question after he tried to do everything that he could do. It would’ve been nice if she had told him this earlier.

Two days ago, he tried to give Mashiro some baumkuchen, but he failed. The next day, he tried with the deluxe melon bread, but he failed. Sorata’s wallet was getting thinner and thinner. And instead of thanking Sorata for the food,

“It’s an idiot-like Sorata.”

“How is that an idiot!”

So Sorata was getting more depressed, and he wanted to cry.

The relationship between Mashiro and him wasn’t getting better at all. To making things worse, it felt like their relationship was worsening. This morning, there was a note on Mashiro’s door saying「Sorata’s not allowed」and it hurt him deeply. Well, obviously, he tore it off, scrunched it up and walked in after throwing it out in the bin…

He didn’t see a winning path. He was worried that the current situation might last forever.

So he could only sigh.

“Sigh~….”

How can people get closer to one another?

Achieving peace was difficult.

While Sorata was reflecting on those thoughts, he heard something snapping in half. Turing his attention onto the board, he saw Koharu trembling in fury with a broken red chalk in her hand.

Koharu was looking at the classroom with wrinkles on her forehead. She was about to

snap.

“Akasaka~.”

The one Koharu addressed in a forced gentle voice was Sorata’s classmate who was sitting diagonally behind Sorata. He sat right behind Nanami as well.

Looking over his shoulder, Sorata saw Akasaka looking at the laptop screen with a serious expression. Instead of replying, he didn’t even show any response.

“He~y, Akasaka~.”

Sorata quietly spoke to him.

Ryuunosuke started to type away on the keyboard.

Suddenly, Sorata’s phone vibrated inside his pocket. Wondering who it was at this time, he checked his phone under the desk. It was a message from Ryuunosuke.

— I’m busy right now.

“Say it to me!”

Then another message came.

— Be quiet, Kanda.

“I’m telling you, say it with your mouth!”

Finally, Ryuunosuke looked at him.

“Koharu-sensei is talking to you.”

“I don’t want to talk to the hulk. Tell her that I permit her to talk.”

“Tell her yourself!”

“I can hear you~.”

Koharu puffed out her cheeks like a child. Ryuunosuke didn’t bother to look up at her and kept typing.

“Akasaka, are my lessons that boring?”

“I don’t think that way.”

“Really? Reaalllyyy~?”

For a moment, Koharu’s expression lit up. But that lasted for a very short moment.

“I’m just not interested. In you or your lessons.”

A deep wrinkle line formed on Koharu’s forehead. If any more stress is inflicted on Koharu, her sanity will be in danger.

“You don’t need to feel bad about it. Since I’m not interested in most things in the world anyway.”

“Well, what have you been doing for a while, Akasaka-kun?”

Ryuunosuke typed on the keyboard with some clacking sounds.

Sorata’s phone vibrated again.

— Even if I explained, she wouldn’t understand. It’s a waste of time. Tell her to shut up for me.

“How can I tell her that!”

“Hmmph. Never mind~. So you two are going to treat me like this. I’m going to tell Chihiro on you.”

It seemed like Koharu was upset. In life, it looks like even an adult can acts childishly. What must one do to become an adult?

“But wait, I’ve got nothing to do with this! Don’t group me with him.”

As soon as Sorata said that, he received a message.

— We’re friends right?

“Don’t drag me into this!”

“Hey Kanda, stop that.”

While no-one in the class attempted to cut in the conversation, the one who finally cut in was Nanami who was next to him. She was looking at Sorata with an angry expression. No, she was glaring at him.

“The teacher is obviously hurt. Don’t treat her so informally like she’s your buddy.”

For some reason, Koharu was staring at Sorata.

“I’m going to be mean to Kanda today. First, why don’t you get up and read the textbook out loud for me?”

“Why me!”

“Take responsibility as a member of Sakurasou.”

When Sorata glanced at Nanami, she was eyeing him with a message that said she would kill him if he brought her into it.

Sorata unwillingly got up to read the textbook.

Thanks to Ryuunosuke, Nanami was in a worse mood than before. How could Sorata make up with her?

But nevertheless, he had to obey the teacher. Bothering the classmates around him wasn’t the problem, but if Sorata turned the situation worse, his head would fly off.

After reading out loud, Sorata sat back down, but Koharu made him stand up again to tell the class about how the protagonist was feeling in a certain scene in the book. Afterwards, Koharu made him get up to read some more and write a few things on the board as well.

Meanwhile, Ryuunosuke became quiet, so Sorata thought that he was reflecting on his behavior, but he was wrong. Ryuunosuke had already forgotten about what had happened before and was fiddling around with his smartphone. He was only quiet because touching the screen didn’t make any noise.

Seeing Ryuunosuke like that made Sorata feel angry, but Sorata continued to carry out Koharu’s unfair punishments. Finally, Koharu let him go after nearly 30 minutes and Sorata was finally allowed to sit back down on his chair. For a while, Sorata eyed Koharu to read her mood, but it seemed like he didn’t have to worry about her now.

When he felt safe, he looked at Nanami to read her mood. Nanami was concentrating and Sorata's gaze was completely ignored.

After thinking for a while, Sorata shifted his table towards Nanami's. He wrote a note on the edge of his book to show to Nanami.

— What do you want to have for dinner?

Nanami glanced at Sorata.

— Why don't you ask the lady with the bigger chest?

Her words were thorny. Nanami was attacking strongly from the first hit. But it wasn't a bad start considering that she could've ignored him. From now on, Sorata needed to use his negotiation skills. Although he didn't have any to begin with…

— It's not like I like bigger ones.

When he mentioned the breast sizes, Sorata's gaze turned towards Nanami's. He didn't consider Nanami's to be small. Noticing where Sorata was looking, Nanami threw an eraser at him.

"Ouch!"

After the eraser bounced off Sorata's forehead, he picked it up off the floor and gave it back to Nanami.

— Pervert. [13]

— From a caterpillar to a cocoon? [14]

— From a human to just scraps.

So he was degraded from human scraps to just scraps as soon as the second semester began. Did the negotiations fail? No, it would be over if he gave up.

— A- anyhow, let's talk it over.

— The one you should talk with is Mashiro.

When Nanami mentioned Sorata's worries, he stopped moving his mechanical pencil.

— How long are you going to avoid Mashiro?

— It's not like I'm avoiding her.

— Is that the truth?

— Probably.

— Ask that yourself.

— Ask what?

When Nanami finished writing and moved away her hand to reveal what she had written, the mechanical pencil inside Sorata's hand started to shake.

— If she should go back to England or not.

Sorata lifted his hand up from the table to sort of hide the writing.

— She said that she won't return.

What he ended up writing was extremely messy.

— But you don't even believe that.

Believe what? Believe who? Mashiro? What Mashiro said? Or was she talking about his feeling to accept what Mashiro said?

It all started to stack up and weigh down Sorata's heart. Mashiro told Rita that she wouldn't return, but as time passed, Sorata's memory started to get hazy about what Mashiro actually said and he couldn't even remember if that was what Mashiro really said.

— Is it really ok if she goes away?

It wasn't ok. That was the first thing that popped up in his head. But he wasn't sure if he could really write that down. The mechanical pencil didn't move even a millimetre on top of the book.

He knew that he didn't want Mashiro to leave. But he wasn't sure if Mashiro should really return to the artistic world or not- so he wasn't sure how he truly felt. To

Sorata, both thoughts were true to him.

— Today could be the day.

— For what?

— The day that Mashiro's parents come to take Mashiro back.

Sorata's heart tightened. It left an invisible wound in Sorata's heart.

He didn't know what Mashiro's parents were like. He didn't know what they might do. However, he knew that adults and children thought differently. On the last day of the summer break, Sorata realized that the school was just a big frog in a small pond at the「Let's Make a Game」presentation. Painfully so…

If Mashiro's parents really do try to take back Mashiro, then it might be actually quite simple for them to do so. Just like what Rita said, all they had to do was to unenroll Mashiro from the school and take away the place where Mashiro can stay. Whether it's Suimei High school or Sakurasou, Mashiro wouldn't be allowed to stay anywhere. Even if the Sakurasou members try to do anything against the decision, Sorata thought that they wouldn't be able to make a difference.

So Sorata could visualize Mashiro going back to England quite clearly.

A week was more than enough for him to understand the seriousness of the current situation.

— Irreversible things could happen.

Nanami's words drove deep into Sorata's heart. He started to write to release some of his pain.

— It's not fair to only write correct things.

Nanami was surprised when she read his words and looked at Sorata out of the corners of her eyes.

— I was being harsh. Sorry.

Everything that Nanami said was true. However, Sorata wasn't mature enough to give up on Mashiro just because he understood the situation nor was he immature enough to

whine about it.

He was still unable to make up his mind and his thoughts were all over the place. Currently, he hoped that Mashiro wouldn't go back, but thinking about the future, he felt that Mashiro should go back to the artistic world like Rita said. He was afraid that Mashiro's parents were going to come and take back Mashiro… and that Mashiro would disappear.

Over the last two, three days, Sorata's heart was like a broken compass- pointing towards his various thoughts spontaneously.

— We should make up our minds.

Nanami looked at Sorata after she wrote that. From that, he was able to tell. That Nanami was actually nervous about this as well. She was worried about the fact that Mashiro might leave, and she wasn't able to make up her mind clearly as well. That's why they had to make up their minds soon.

He had to face the reality that he's been running away from. Even if it meant putting on a faux brave face, he had to do it. If he wanted to push onwards, he had to endure Nanami's harsh words.

— I'll talk about it with Shiina.

Sorata wrote that on a corner of the book.

— Suit yourself.

At Nanami's reply, Sorata slightly smiled.

Koharu was saying something. About how she needed a boyfriend, how she wanted to get married, and other random things that had nothing to do with the lesson. What was wrong with the teachers at this school, like Chihiro or Koharu. Also, the clacking sounds from the keyboard were mixed with Koharu's ramblings. Clack clack… clack clack and so on…

But suddenly, those noises stopped. This time, the sound of rustling of someone going through a bag could be heard. From the diagonal seat behind Sorata… and the seat behind Nanami. It was impossible not to be distracted.

Naturally, Sorata looked towards the source of the noise. He should say something at

least.

Nanami done the same thing as Sorata and looked behind her.

The person who the two of them looked at was the tenant in Room 102 of Sakurasou-Ryuunosuke Akasaka. He had a lunchbox on his desk. The contents of his lunch were bright red. There were four tomatoes. There weren't anything else. It looked like he was only going to eat tomatoes. Ryuunosuke grabbed one and even though it was still the lesson time, he opened his mouth wide and took a bite from it. As he did, the juice and some seeds squirted out from the inside. Some of it traveled in an arc and landed on Nanami's forehead.

For the first time in his life, Sorata heard someone's patience running out. It could've been his feeling, but he thought he heard it for sure. At Nanami's sudden change of atmosphere, Sorata stopped himself from complaining to Ryuunosuke.

Nanami coldly wiped away the seeds with a tissue.

"I've desperately held back over the last week, but I've reached my limits…"

The voice coming from Nanami was unimaginably cold.

"It doesn't matter if you've been a hikikomori[15] for a while…"

Ryuunosuke didn't seem to care about it at all…. In fact, he didn't even think that Nanami was addressing him as he brought the tomato to his mouth again.

"Give it a rest…"

Ryuunosuke reached out for the second tomato.

"I'm talking to you, Akasaka!"

The entire class held their breath and turned their attention towards the three. Sorata, Nanami and Ryuunosuke were the eye of the typhoon.

"The class is still going on. Stop the chitchat, Ponytail. You're bothering the teacher and our classmates. Look, they're looking at you in shock."

"I don't want to hear that from someone who only brings tomatoes for lunch!"

No, normally, one should point out the fact that people shouldn't eat tomatoes so boldly in class. Thanks to Nanami's unexpected comeback, Sorata regained his reasoning.

"Tomatoes are highly nutritious. It's obvious that you should eat them."

Although Sorata didn't want to cut in, he had no choice but to cut in. All of his classmates and Koharu, who was the teacher, were relying on him. So he said,

"What Aoyama was asking wasn't about the benefits of eating tomatoes…"

"I know. Tomatoes contain a high level of lycopene- enough for there to be saying 'When the tomatoes become bright red, doctors' face grows pale.'[16]"

"So you're fine talking about nutrition, Aoyama? And why do you know so much?!"

"Kanda, you stay quiet!"

"… Yes, I'm sorry."

Behind him, Koharu said「So you can't do anything against them」and criticized him but Sorata decided to put up with it.

"Make yourself clear, Ponytail."

"Don't eat in class."

"These are supplements. These provide me with the nutrients that I need and I can prevent being deteriorated."

"Wait until lunchtime."

"Holding back is harmful for the body."

"And why do you always pack tomatoes!"

Sorata could understand, but there wasn't a special reason to keep asking that question…

"Because it's not efficient to think of a different menu each time. To maximize my working time, I have a fixed menu. I can't waste time thinking of different foods that I

can have, because each day, I'll be losing time that I can spend on numerous things. with tomatoes, I don't have to prepare it in anyway, so I can cut down time, and I can also eat them with one hand while working on something else. Also, with a fixed menu, you get a lifestyle routine that enhances your concentration. So I recommend it to you, Ponytail, since you have to manage school, academy, part time jobs and the school festival organization meetings. You may follow me."

Nanami probably didn't think that there were so many specific reasons for Ryuunosuke's eating habits. She struggled to think of what to say next.

"A-anyways, pay attention in class. The clacking noise is quite annoying."

"Those who are distracted by small sounds like these are the ones who aren't concentrating in class. I know that I'm not a bother if people aren't paying attention in class in the first place. Also, the only reason why I come to school is to move up a grade safely and eventually graduate. To achieve these two things, I need to have an attendance of 2 out of 3 times and not fail my final exams. So I don't need to pay attention in class. That's my explanation."

Nanami who had been angry until a moment ago, now had a puzzled expression. Sorata understood why she did. Rather than being angry, she was probably feeling puzzled. Thinking 'What is this guy saying'.

But Nanami wasn't going to back off now.

"This is why I don't like women. They lose their sense of reasoning when they are wrapped up in their emotions. It's outrageous for you to force your sense of justice onto me. It's troublesome for you to think that your rules should apply to everything. The world doesn't revolve around you, Ponytail. It revolves around me."

"Don't make the situation worse!"

"Shiroyama-sensei, please lend me that dictionary on the table."

"No weapons allowed, Aoyama! Calm down! And don't let her borrow it, sensei!"

Koharu must've been on Nanami's side, because she was passing the dictionary without any hesitation.

"I'll make sure to wipe it clean when I return it back to you."

“What are you going to spill on it!”

Then the bell rang, notifying them that the lesson had finished.

“Now~, that’s it for today’s lesson. Aoyama, you can keep the dictionary because I’ll submit it as the proof of violence~.”

Koharu quickly tied up the lesson and fled the classroom.

The remaining students all grew silent.

Meanwhile, Ryuunosuke had finished all of the tomatoes. There were four green tops inside his lunchbox. He got up after putting it back inside his bag.

“Akasaka, you shouldn’t fight.”

“Violence doesn’t solve anything. I’m going to the toilet.”

Ryuunosuke turned to the right and walked away. Sorata and Nanami watched his figure walk into the corridor in silence.

“Kanda.”

“What?”

“Do me a favour. Please let me hit you.”

“Violence doesn’t solve anything.”

“History begs to differ.”

“Hey hey hey hey, let’s talk it over! Please listen to my view of history!”

Afterwards, it took all of lunch time to calm Nanami down. But Sorata’s efforts were futile, because during the 5th period (English), Nanami and Ryuunosuke went on war again, with Ryuunosuke using Maid-chan version up program.

“Akasaka! What do you think a school is!”

“A place full of young people without a goal in life.”

“You just made yourself an enemy to all of students.”

Sorata realized that achieving peace was difficult.

Part 2

After finishing up his cleaning duties, Sorata headed towards the art classrooms. It was to pick Mashiro up, who was constantly getting lost.

"Sigh."

Sorata sighed without actually meaning to. It was a hard day for him today. From now on, he wouldn't be able to sleep in class because Nanami and Ryuunosuke's war will probably continue tomorrow as well. It was the worst match-up, having Nanami, who was stubborn about her views just like Misaki, and Ryuunosuke, who was even more stubborn than Mashiro when it came to doing things their way, fighting together.

The road to peace was quite a long one.

Outside the window, he could see the sunset and see the western skies dyed red. The autumn air felt fairly light.

A bunch of jersey wearing students ran past the flight of stairs. They were the tracks club. Sorata noticed a face of one of his classmates from the year before as they ran past. Since the 3rd years had already retired, the number of club members decreased by a large amount. The expressions of 2nd years telling their juniors what to do stiffly didn't feel reassuring. But their determination to lead the club after the 3rd years left could be felt.

Although there was nearly half a year left until the 3rd years graduated, most of them have already parted ways with their club. The rest of the club members must've respected their decisions- that was what it looked like anyway.

Seeing the track team run off, Sorata made his way again to the art classrooms.

The art classrooms were across the hallway, in a separate building. The 1st floor was club rooms, 2nd floor was the music rooms and the 3rd floor was the art rooms.

As soon as he arrived on the 3rd floor, a unique smell tickled Sorata's nose. He could sense people inside the classroom in front of him. So he opened the door and found Mashiro inside.

As well as Mashiro, Sorata spotted a few other students he was familiar with. They were Mashiro's classmates.

The class had already finished, so the teacher was nowhere in sight. It was only the student who were lightly socialising while packing up their equipments.

The classroom was in a relaxed mood, just simply letting the time flow.

However, Mashiro was different. She was in a corner of the class where the ceiling was slightly higher and she was painting on a canvas with a paintbrush.

Her other classmates were chatting about some video site that they went on yesterday. They were also chatting about visiting the shops on their way home. However, those voices didn't reach Mashiro. It was like there was an invisible layer that surrounded her.

To Mashiro, the only thing that she could see was the canvas.

The students walked out of the class after they finished packing up. One by one, they left and some of them even turned back to try to say something to Mashiro. However, there was one thing in common with all of them. And that was that no-one actually said anything to her.

Witnessing the entire situation, Sorata felt sad from the bottom of his heart. He was able to tell very clearly- Mashiro was a loner.

Within 5 minutes of Sorata walking into Mashiro's classroom, only they remained. Mashiro didn't notice anything. She wasn't even aware of it. For Mashiro, it didn't really matter what other people did…

It was exactly the same when Mashiro was working on her manga. She would block out everything when she was concentrating on something.

Mashiro being like this made Sorata feel so distant from her.

Even though Sorata had been looking at her for a while, Mashiro didn't notice. There was only the canvas between them. She should be able to see Sorata.

"… Just what are you looking at?"

Sorata thought that he didn't exist in Mashiro's world.

Normally, people would describe her as being talented or being a genius, but it wasn't that easy to express it in words after actually seeing her skills.

Art was incomprehensible. But it was undeniable that he could feel a force from Mashiro that no-one else possessed. Watching her gave him the chills. She had an aura around her that made it harder to approach her.

Sorata came all the way here to talk to her, but it was going to be difficult at the moment.

Because Sorata's words wouldn't reach Mashiro.

Closing the door as he left the classroom, Sorata leaned against it outside. The corridor tiles were cold.

He could only wait for Mashiro's concentration to weaken. But he got too tired while waiting for her, so he couldn't converse with her. It was like this for the entire week. Even if he made an opportunity to talk to her, he couldn't get any closer and it became a stalemate like situation. Sorata was too afraid to make a sudden decision. The reason why he was still slightly playful was because he didn't want to talk to her seriously. He realised now that this shouldn't continue any further…

Today could really be the day that Mashiro's parents come to take her back…

Sorata took out his phone from his pocket. Opening the contacts, he went to「Mashiro Shiina」. Scrolling down to her number, Sorata pressed the enter button.

It was an improvised idea yet a simple action. He started to type what was on his mind on a message.

— I think I can only tell you this now, so I'll say it in a message.

He pressed the send button.

He continued to type some more straight away.

— It's confusing for me as well.

Send.

— It's too sudden to say that you're going to be taken away to England.

He sent the message again. But there were no replies. Mashiro was probably too focused on her painting that she didn't notice.

— My head's in a mess after hearing that your painting will go down in history.

He re-read the message to make sure that it made sense, but he didn't feel like re-wording it in any other way.

— I can picture you leaving too clearly in my head

Sorata continued to type the exact thoughts that were on his mind. His pride didn't matter to him right now.

— There are times when you just can't figure out an answer.

This was the only way for him to deliver his feelings to Mashiro.

— It's not easy, you know.

Expressing his honest thoughts and worries, Sorata continued to send the messages.

— What exactly is art?

It was something that he typed out, but Sorata laughed at it.

As his laugh turned into a bitter one, he thought of what to say next.

— I'm not on Rita's side. That's for sure.

He was confident in what he wrote.

— But I might not be on Shiina's side either.

What he was typing was ridiculously honest. For a moment he wondered if he should actually send this or not. But he didn't want to change his mind, and he was being stubborn with himself.

—Anyway, what was I going to say?

He tried to recollect his thoughts.

— Ah, that's right. I came here to say something to you.

He remembered what he wanted to say.

— I know about your manga.

That's right, he could say this proudly.

— Your manga is really exciting. I'm not lying.

But this isn't what he wanted to say.

— Yeah, I think I came here to say this.

Thinking that this was the last time, he pressed the send button. After sending it, he silently looked at his phone screen with a sense of accomplishment. However, he suddenly realised something and opened up the messages again.

— But do you even know how to read messages?

Thinking that Sorata had to read out the messages out loud to Mashiro, he felt like it was the worst possible punishment that he could get.

Clenching his phone, Sorata yawned. It must've been due to his lack of sleep ever

since he started sleeping in the kitchen.

Looking at the tip of his feet blankly, he heard a bell ring. Focusing on the sound, he could hear the sound of some piano playing. It was coming from the floor below- the music rooms.

But that was when he felt the phone vibrate.

It was a message. Was it Misaki sending a message from outer space? Or was it Jin asking him to buy something? There was also the possibility of Chihiro calling him out.

He manipulated his phone to read the message.

But he couldn't- there wasn't anything written on the message.

Even though it was an empty message, Sorata was feeling happy and nervous at the same time.

Because the sender was Mashiro.

Hiding behind the door, Sorata peeked inside the classroom and saw Mashiro hunching. He could see a faint light from her phone. Mashiro was bitting on her lips while pressing some buttons with a troubled expression.

Then, Sorata's phone rang.

— Sa

That was all that was written on the message.

"What are you trying to type?"

Sorata spoke through the door.

Mashiro turned around and looked at him.

"What does the 「Sa」 mean?"

"「Sa」 as in 「Sorata is an idiot」."

Mashiro didn't understand that she had to press the Sa button a few more times to

reach So.

“So you do know how to read messages.”

“Ayano taught me.”

Ayano was the name of Mashiro’s manga editor who she was indebted to. It must be hard being Mashiro’s editor. But Sorata thought that Ayano should’ve taught Mashiro how to send a message as well.

Sorata got up and walked towards Mashiro.

“Hey, Sorata.”

“What is it?”

“I think these things called messages are useful.”

“It’s scary when you only receive a single letter or half of a word though.”

“Then teach me.”

Mashiro extended her phone to him.

Her face was full of expectations. Sorata felt happy that they were conversing for the first time in a while.

“All right.”

When Sorata started to press down on the buttons of the phone, Mashiro came closer to him and looked at the screen. Their shoulders were touching; making Sorata feel nervous.

But at that moment, Mashiro’s phone in Sorata’s hands started to vibrate. Sorata’s phone, which was in his pocket, vibrated as well.

— Emergency situation! Everyone comeback to Sakurasou!

It was a message from Misaki. The message was decorated with fancy outlines. What was going on?

When Sorata looked at Mashiro’s face, he saw her tilting her head cutely.

If it was an emergency situation, then what was it? Could it be that Mashiro's parents have arrived…. But if that was the case, Misaki would've sent a proper message.

"I want to send messages like this."

Mashiro pointed at Misaki's message on the screen.

"I don't know how to send these well."

"I want to as well."

"All right, all right. I'll teach you on our way."

So, they walked home while Sorata taught Mashiro how to send messages.

There were a lot more things that Sorata wanted to say to Mashiro. Although he didn't know how much time he had left with Mashiro, he knew that his time was continuously decreasing each second.

Sorata felt frustrated at himself for not being able to do anything about it while still being aware of it. But on the other hand, he felt that this wasn't too bad.

Mashiro was by his side, and Mashiro appeared to be happy at least.

That was enough for now.

Part 3

After waiting for Nanami who was late due to her part time job, the Sakurasou meeting took place.

“The reason why I called everyone here is because of that!”

Misaki stood at the centre of the kitchen table while holding her fist up high. Her frilled skirt was fluttering and one could almost see what was beneath the skirt.

“Kamiigusa-senpai, we can see your panties! Sit down!”

“No need to worry, Nanamin! This is a short pants that only looks like a skirt!”

So that was why it was nearly visible, but wasn’t quite there.

“Kanda, you look disappointed.”

“What are you saying, Aoyama.”

Hugging Misaki from the back, Jin sat her down.

Being hugged by someone that she liked, even the alien became silent.

Around the table were Chihiro, Misaki, Jin, Sorata, Mashiro and Nanami in that order. Ryuunosuke was participating via a chat room, because he hasn’t come out of his room ever since he got back. Jin was prepared with a laptop.

They also asked Rita if she wanted to participate, but she was in the middle of a RPG boss fight. She said,

“Please don’t talk to me right now. The fate of the world lies in my hands.”

That with a serious look in her eyes, so they let her be. Rita said that she was already at the boss level on a game she started that day out of a whim while the other Sakurasou members were at school.

“So, what was that emergency situation that Misaki-senpai mentioned?”

“Everyone! The time has come to face this day!”

“What day?”

“With the strongest members of Sakurasou gathered here today! We are going to pool all of our powers together to put on the greatest performance and dominate the culture festival!”

Not understanding what was just said, Sorata and Nanami put on a puzzled face. Jin was drinking his coffee with a satisfied face while typing on the laptop. Mashiro was working on her name in a sketchbook.

“Senpai, please explain in a way that normal humans can understand.”

“That’s no good, Kohai-kun! You should be able to feel it with your body!”

“Feel what?”

“Don’t you think that we should do things with a burning passion with our Sakurasou members! And you call yourself a human, Kohai-kun! Don’t you have any hot burning blood of youth!”

Sorata sent a help signal to Jin with his eyes.

“She’s saying that we should do something for the school festival with the Sakurasou members.”

“Haa….”

Next to Sorata, Nanami put on an expression that said that she sort of understood.

But what were they going to make?

“Me and Mashiron will be in charge of graphics! The script will obviously be done by Jin and Dragon will be developing! Nanami will be acting and Kohai-kun will be planning!”

Misaki added on saying that she’ll leave the sounds to someone else as she pointed straight at Sorata. He stared at the tip of Misaki’s hand and blankly blinked. Nanami’s reaction wasn’t any different. Mashiro looked up from her sketchbook.

“That means…”

What Misaki said was unbelievable.

To have the Sakurasou members work together on a single project.

Sorata looked around the round kitchen table, at the faces of Sakurasou members.

Misaki’s skill of creating animations by herself was genuine. There was no need to even mention how great Mashiro was- being recognized as a world-class genius at painting as well as being a mangaka. The same could be said about the programmer and game developer Ryuunosuke just by looking at his automatic replying AI Maid-chan.

With the script writer of Misaki’s animations, Jin, and the voice actress student Nanami as well, the possibility of creating something amazing was high.

Whether it’s the visual aspect or the technological aspect, it was possible to make it straight away.

Just by even thinking about it, Sorata naturally smiled.

“Kohai-kun, what’s with that silly smile!”

“I’m sorry… I just think that it’ll be great fun.”

“Well, leaving the idea of presenting something at the culture festival aside, I have a question.”

Nanami slightly raised her hand.

“Sure. Nanamin, say it boldly!”

“Would we get permission to participate at the culture festival under the Sakurasou’s name? I know this as one of the festival organisers that the application for it is quite strict.”

The culture festival was held every year under a strict supervision so that the local community wasn’t in harm’s way.

Everyone’s gaze fell onto the teacher, Chihiro.

She was opening a can of beer.

“We haven’t been granted permission over the last 10 years.”

That was an obvious decision for the school. With the troubled students who made up Sakurasou, it was unthinkable to think what would happen if Sakurasou members were to participate in an event like the culture festival.

“But all of the Sakurasou members over the last 10 years participated in the culture festival though.”

“So that’s what you mean…”

Nanami sighed again. She already knew the answer.

“So we’re going to participate guerrilla style.”

Jin spoke like it was nothing.

“So we do have some constraints. One is that we can’t present something for a long time while the other is that we need to find a spot for it.”

Last year, they aimed for the short time interval between the acting club and the ensemble club in the gym to perform a short storytelling with mask-wearing Misaki. The script was written by Jin.

“Ryuunosuke says「No problem」.”

Jin told them Ryuunosuke’s response on the chat room.

Misaki added on.

“This should be fun.”

“I guess it won’t matter.”

“I’ll agree with it, but you need to get permission from the school.”

“We’ll leave that to you, Aoyama. It’s great that we have one of the festival organizers on our side.”

“I won’t accept bribes!”

“So that’s why we’re relying on you, Aoyama.”

Jin wore a mean smile. He was basically telling her that it didn’t matter if they got the permission or not- if Nanami couldn’t accept that, then Nanami would have to get the permission herself.

“Kanda, you have to help me.”

“Ehh? Why bring me into it?”

“You promised me before.”

Nanami whispered to him. Speaking of which, he did remember a promise like that.

“But what are we going to create?”

“I already decided to use the theatre room this year~!”

That place was a movie theatre like facility that was equipped with state of the art equipments.

“What was the seating capacity for it again?”

Sorata remembered visiting that place before.

“Around 300 I think.”

If so, it was almost as big as a small movies theatre.

“Please stop them, sensei.”

Nanami whispered to Chihiro.

“I don’t want to~. It’s a bother to even try it.”

“Aoyama, you know that Chihiro-sensei is made up of half beer and half meetings. You realise what that means right?”

“I shouldn’t expect anything from her…”

“Just don’t bother me.”

Chihiro got up to take out another can of beer as she said that and then returned to her room. She was only a teacher on the outside. No, in this case, maybe they should be happy that their teacher wasn't bothered to stop them.

"I want us to do something that's only possible at a culture festival~ I want to do something that only Sakurasou can do~. I want to make something~. I want to make something~. Kohai-kun!"

What is there that can only be done at a culture festival? A festival. At a festival…

"Then what about this?"

Being swept up in Misaki's keyword, Sorata got a vision inside him.

Misaki stepped onto the table on all fours and crawled towards him.

"What is it, what is it?"

"Senpai, get your face off me!"

Sorata put some distance between her by moving back his chair. Checking Jin's face out of the corners of his eyes, Jin had a slightly annoyed expression as expected. Misaki's actions were a bother. Misaki was still on the table while grumbling.

"So what I was thinking was, with Misaki-senpai and Shiina, I know that we'll be able to create something that is visually outstanding."

"Of course."

"And we've got Dragon, so we can make it a game as well~."

Sorata nodded.

"But I don't think that's enough to carry out the feeling of a culture festival, and we don't need a theatre room for that."

"But it'll be a big hit if it's on a big screen and people will be able to feel the energy!"

"Well, that's true, but it would be a pity if one person was controlling the game while everyone else watched."

“You have a point there. But wouldn’t it be boring to make it an ordinary viewing session? What do you suggest?”

“I’m thinking of having an attraction that involves the viewers as well…”

Misaki couldn’t understand what Sorata was saying and had a questioning look.

“For example?”

The person who asked was Nanami. She must’ve been slightly interested in Sorata’s idea.

“For example, depending on the scene, the character would move when the audience claps. Or even waving or yelling would do, anyway, I guess what I’m aiming for is something that everyone does in sync or in unison. To have a game where you defeat enemies as you play along, a game like that… maybe?”

It was certainly difficult to try to deliver the uniqueness of his idea in words. Sorata tried his best to explain his idea in a suitable way, but everyone became silent.

Maybe his idea didn’t get through to them. Or maybe the idea itself was dull.

When the silence continued, Sorata started to feel embarrassed that he was actually speaking so seriously.

“That’s it, Kohai-kun!”

The one who agreed with him straight away was Misaki. Excited, she stood up.

“That sounds like fun, Sorata.”

“I really like the fact that everyone will be a part of the experience.”

Jin and Nanami expressed their approval of the idea.

It was only Mashiro who didn’t understand.

“Unizon?[17]”

Saying that, she tilted her head to the side.

Let's leave her for now.

"The problem is if it's actually possible."

"We can just ask Ryuunosuke about that."

Jin placed the laptop in front of Sorata.

Ryuunosuke had been a part of the entire discussion via the chat.

Sorata typed on the keyboard to ask a question.

— So, do you think it could be realised?

— Normally, it would be impossible.

A reply came straight away.

— So it's not even possible for you, Akasaka?

— Don't get ahead of yourself. I only said normally.

— So if it's not normally, then it's possible?

— Correct.

— Really?

— We can utilise a full body capture system for the motions. We can use a voice recognition program to pick up the chatters, shouts or claps. The technology is all there, the only thing left is to actually using it

— But can a motion capture system pick up so much people at the same time?

— Not a problem. With your idea's scale, it's more than enough. I've got a plan.

What a reliable guy. He was truly reliable.

— Well, I'm glad that it's possible technologically, but can we actually get our hands on the full motion capture controller that you mentioned?

— Your idea's perked my interest. I'm going to contact the hardware developers for

it, so wait for a sec.

— Of course I'll wait!

For a while, there were no messages from Ryuunosuke.

"Is he talking to them right now?"

Nanami asked, looking at the laptop screen suspiciously.

"Probably."

"What kind of a guy is Akasaka…?"

"He's a goodwill ambassador of the Tomato Kingdom and our classmate."

"… Oh yeah. Why is everyone around me so weird?"

"Am I included in that?"

"Of course."

"Ehh! Really?"

— I finished negotiating the settlement. The hardware will arrive around next week.

— Man, you're really awesome.

— However, it's requires an NDA[18]. We are only allowed to develop the software for promotional purposes. We can't sell the product.

— I wouldn't dream of it, so it's not a problem!

Looking up from the computer screen, Sorata saw everyone- Misaki, Jin, Nanami and Mashiro looking at him.

"He says that it's all possible!"

Misaki grabbed Mashiro and Nanami and embraced them tightly.

"So now, we need to plan out our characters and the storyline. We're going to be short on time if we're going to be working from scratch. And it's not like everyone here

will be able to spend all their time for the culture festival preparation."

Certainly, Jin was right.

Mashiro was busy with her manga serialisation and Ryuunosuke had to work on other projects as well as a programmer. Even if they could manage their time well, Misaki had her solo animation project and Nanami was busy with her academy and part time jobs. Jin had to study for the university entrance exams himself. Even Sorata was busy with learning how to program and writing up a proposal to hand in for the January round of Let's Make a Game. They needed more than 2 months if they were going to start the project from the bottom up.

While thinking those thoughts, Mashiro pulled Sorata's sleeves.

"Hmm? You thought of something?"

Mashiro nodded her head.

"Nyaboron."

"Ohhh, that's it, Mashiron!"

Misaki showed her reaction first.

"… You mean that? Well, it might actually work, since it's appealing to the adults as well."

Jin nodded after thinking about something. As expected of Misaki's childhood friend.

Galactic Cat Nyaboron had a story that involved battling giant evil monsters, so it fit in with Sorata's concept. For the explanation parts, they could do some acting… no, with Mashiro with them, they could do some flash animations and play it at a fast tempo. With the battle parts, they could have an impacting scene with Misaki's 3D models and let the viewers join in with the unison actions.

With the current outline, Sorata felt that they would be able to create something truly spectacular.

"What's Nyaboron?"

The only one who didn't know about it was Nanami.

“Come over to my room later.”

“Sorata is pretty brave, every now and then.”

“Huh? F-for what? What are ya gonna do to me?”

“I’ll say it now that I’m not after your body.”

“If it isn’t then w-what is it?”

Using her dialect, Nanami shyly asked.

“One day, Misaki-senpai and Shiina came into my room and drew all over the walls. And this「Galactic Cat Nyaboron」is a character that Misaki-senpai thought of.”

“W-was that what you meant…? So it’s those drawings on the wall…”

“Then I’ll have regular discussions with you and Ryuunosuke. We should plan out a schedule before we start, so that we can have an idea of where we’re going with this, right?”

“Ah, you’re right.”

“So us boys we’ll be together until the work is done. Two months will pass just like that.”

Because of the long hard work that was before them, Jin smiled wearily. Seeing that, Sorata thought of something. Jin mentioned that he wouldn’t be able to sleep over at anyone else’s house for a while. So this was what he meant.

In contrast to Jin, Sorata was particularly excited for it.

At that moment

“It feels so good to save to world.”

Saying that, Rita walked into the kitchen. She had a very satisfied expression. Seems like she was able to clear that RPG game.

“Rita.”

About to open the fridge door, Rita turned around in surprise when Mashiro called her

name. It wasn't surprising, since Mashiro hasn't even approached Rita during the week.

"What is it, Mashiro?"

Rita was happily smiling.

"Sleep in my room."

Sorata made an 'Ehhh' sound and Nanami looked at Mashiro in surprise. As if she was looking at a tennis rally, Misaki was looking back and forth between Mashiro and Rita.

Jin got up from his seat and refilled his coffee from the kitchen bench.

"What's the reason for the sudden change of mind?"

"You can't stay in Sorata's room anymore."

"May I ask why?"

"Because it's not good."

"Even when there isn't the possibility of Sorata doing anything to me? Because unlike Jin, Sorata isn't very functional in that area."

Hearing that, Jin nodded his head up and down.

"But it's still not good."

Even Mashiro was agreeing with Rita.

"Not you as well! Do you even know how much I had to hold it back? Apologise to my level of self control!"

"Be quiet, Sorata."

For some reason, Mashiro glared at him with a tense look.

"But there is a freedom of speech right?"

He tried asking for Nanami's support.

“Just sit still.”

They were treating him like a little child.

“I don’t mind sleeping in Mashiro’s room.”

Mashiro’s expression softened.

“But while we’re at it, I have a condition.”

Rita smiled mischievously.

Was she going to tell Mashiro to come back to England with her?

“Say it.”

When Mashiro replied, Rita’s eyes suspiciously lit up and looked at Sorata instead of Mashiro.

“Please give me some time this Sunday.”

“What?”

“To put it in other words, I’m asking you out on a date. Are you happy?”

“F-for what!”

The one who responded first was Nanami.

Mashiro was also pouting.

“You can spare me some of your time for one day. Or do you want me to continue staying in Sorata’s room and take all of his ‘firsts’?”

“What are you going to take away! You beast!”

“So Rita had her eyes on Sorata. No wonder you refused my date advances.”

“That’s how it is. I’m sorry.”

“Oh please~. Don’t worry about it. I’m glad that my cute junior is finally going to become an adult.”

“W-what are you two saying?”

Nanami’s face turned bright red.

“That’s not good enough Ritan! You’re underestimating the bond that I have with Kohai-kun built over many sleepless nights if you think that you can break it over a date or two! Doing an all night play is like nothing to us!”

“Oi Kanda. What did you do with Kamiigusa-senpai!”

Nanami didn’t miss a beat as she asked.

“She’s talking about playing games! Calm down, Aoyama!”

Muttering quietly to herself, Nanami looked away.

“No, what will you do? The choice is up to you, Mashiro.”

Rita’s attitude was becoming bolder and bolder.

Sorata’s eyes met Mashiro’s. It was impossible to tell what she was thinking, but she kept looking into his eyes. While Sorata was trying to figure her out, she turned towards Rita.

With an unwilling expression, Mashiro accepted.

“Don’t sell me off!”

“When we’re on the date together, I’ll teach you some amazing things.”

When Rita spoke with a flirty voice, Sorata’s face quickly blushed. With her finger on her lips, Rita was quite sexy.

“W-what are you going to teach him!”

“Exactly what I’ve said- amazing things.”

Rita smiled as she answered Nanami’s question. She leaned on Sorata with her arms crossed and whispered in Sorata’s ear on her tippy toes.

“I’ll show the true Mashiro to you.”

Her whispers were definitely one of a devil's and her words planted themselves in Sorata's heart. It felt like it would be impossible to escape from her temptations.

"Get away from Sorata."

Mashiro tugged at Rita's arm.

"I'm just saying farewell to him."

Rita was clearly teasing Mashiro and Rita's eyes were smiling as she looked at Sorata.

What did Rita mean by 'true Mashiro'? Sorata had no idea and that was why he wanted to know. About her life back in England, her skills as a painter but on top of that, Sorata wanted more information about Mashiro- so that he can think about what was the best decision for Mashiro. It was always on his mind ever since Rita came.

"Then please look forward to Sunday."

Rita smiled brightly.

"Do whatever you want."

And Rita turned around to face Mashiro and Nanami.

"If you're so worried about my date with Sorata, you can trail us if you want."

"W-we're not going to do that!"

Nanami declined straight away.

"If you do change your mind, you're more than welcome to trail us."

Still smiling brightly, Rita left the kitchen as she said that. Her footsteps could be heard as she went upstairs. She was probably going to Mashiro's room.

"I should leave my schedule empty on Sunday."

Saying those disturbing words, Jin was trying to hold back his laughter as he enjoyed himself.

"Trailing is forbidden!"

Jin responded with a ‘yeah’ with insincerity as he left the kitchen.

“You can’t escape from me, Kohai-kun!”

“What are you saying so boldly!”

Following behind Jin, Misaki also left the room.

Nanami also stood up from her seat and declared.

“I wouldn’t do anything like trailing.”

“Yeah, I’ll believe you, Nanami.”

“S-sure…”

Nanami averted her gaze awkwardly and fled away from the kitchen, to her room.

The only ones left were Mashiro and Sorata.

“Sorata is too close to Rita.”

“Is that my fault?”

“Even though you’re my master.”

“What’s up with your reasoning!”

“If I don’t have Sorata…”

“If you don’t?”

“I can’t live on.”

“You mean physically!”

Part 4

It was Saturday, the 3rd week of September- the day before the date with Rita. Although it was a nice day outside, Sorata didn't move an inch away from Sakurasou.

The day was already over and the stars were shinning outside.

With a serious expression, Sorata was looking at his computer screen. On it was the plot for the「Galactic Cat Nyarobon」that Jin had completed.

Being charged with the role as a director, Sorata's responsibilities were to read the plot and think of the graphics and sounds that would go well with it.

With that in mind, Sorata was working hard on the dramatic scenes of Nyaboron.

After some discussions with Jin and Ryuunosuke, they decided to use some flash animations for the action parts. So for that, they decided to have Mashiro in charge of the graphics. For the battle scenes, since it involved 3D graphics rendering, it was decided to have Misaki working on them.

Something that Sorata had been having problems with at the moment was how he could get Mashiro to understand how to carry out the drama parts.

Since each cut was visualized different from the previous one, Sorata had to discuss each cut with her.

So in the end, Jin came up with the idea of having Sorata draw a storyboard- containing each cut with the appropriate angles. For example, if there wasn't a scene that linked the transition between the drama and the battle parts, they wouldn't be able to create a smooth video.

It was Ryuunosuke who said that those scenes were necessary in order to produce a high quality work. But what he was actually implying was 'Do as I tell you to do'. One thing that Sorata realized as he started to work with the other members as a team was that they were extremely good. Even the lowest quality work from Misaki, Ryuunosuke would be sellable- but would still be considered to be of a high grade. Mashiro was most certainly aiming to become like that subconsciously.

Even Jin stopped sleeping over at his girlfriend's houses and started to continuously stay at Sakurasou. On the day that the three boys completed the backbone of the story, they actually fell asleep in Jin's room. Nanami had a troubled expression when she check up on them in the morning. It was because Sorata and Jin, the two boys, were sleeping on the same bed together- it's obvious that anyone would be troubled at the sight. The only reason Ryuunosuke wasn't in the room with them was because he was participating in the discussion via the chat next door. If possible, Sorata wanted to forget about Jin's warmth.

There was no point in putting it off, so Sorata started to draw the first scene of 「Galactic Cat Nyarobon」 on the storyboard paper that he got from Misaki.

He drew one scene but returned to the very scene again. Piles of eraser droppings started to gather. He wasn't making a progress at all. It took him nearly 30 minutes to draw a scene that he thought to be reasonable. With Misaki's alien-like prediction, there were going to be over 300 scenes. She said that it was equivalent to a minute of an anime production. At his current pace, Sorata was going to take nearly 9000 minutes. Working 8 hours a day, it would take nearly 20 days. It wasn't something that a human is able to do.

"Sorata, what have you been doing ever since this morning?"

When he turned around towards the voice coming from behind him, Sorata nearly screamed.

Looking over his shoulders, he saw Rita who had just come out from the shower. She was wearing the pyjamas that she got from Mashiro and was leaning over the table, looking at the storyboard while drying her hair. The scent of her body cleanser and shampoo, were tickling Sorata's nose.

"Well, Sorata is… how should I say this. It must be tiring for you since the Sakurasou members are so innocent."

"Was that meant to be a compliment?"

"Overall, yes. But do you even know what the current situation is?"

Sorata obviously knew it well. About how Mashiro could go back to England any day soon and that he didn't have a way to prevent it.

"I don't really want to say this, but don't you think you should be more organized with

your time?"

Mashiro was excited for this project as well. Every night, she would visit Sorata's room and do her graphics work and report back to Misaki every time she completed an illustration.

"If that's the Japanese way of saying farewell to her, then it doesn't really matter with me."

"That's not really it."

"But that aside, this is quite artistic."

Rita looked at the storyboard.

"Really? I'm pretty confident with this scene."

"Please don't draw anything ever again, Sorata."

Rita had a pretty serious look in her eyes.

"Ehh?! Why?!"

"Because it's an insult."

"Then are you saying that I suck that much?"

"Are you drawing this while thinking about the bigger picture?"

"No, I'm just drawing whatever that pops up in my head."

"Also, you should pay more attention to the drawings around you. Drawing starts from observation."

Rita pointed at the paintings on the wall. The「Galactic Cat Nyarobon」drawings that Misaki and Mashiro drew were still on the walls. It wasn't going to disappear until Sorata actually remove them…

"Please pass it to me."

Rita took the pencil from Sorata's hand over his shoulders. Her warmth could be felt on his back. The pressure was hard to resist. It was an unbelievable pressure. Was

this how powerful foreign weapons were?

“Uhh… Rita-san?”

“Listen carefully now.”

He was told off.

Trying to distract himself away from the weight on his shoulders, Sorata focused on Rita’s hand and soon enough, he was able to get his mind off her. The way that Rita held the pencil was somewhat similar to Mashiro and her strokes were smooth- like one of a veteran. With each stroke that she made, the image quickly came to life and Sorata couldn’t take his eyes off the paper. The smooth lines crossed each other- adding onto each other to form a single image. After about a minute, Rita was able to reproduce a drawing of Nyaboron the storyboard just like the one that Misaki drew before.

“This is really amazing.”

At that moment, Sorata could feel Rita’s heart beating faster with his back. Rita started to shiver like she was electrified as she dropped the pencil and distanced herself from Sorata.

“What’s wrong?”

“I-It’s nothing.”

With her back turned on him, Sorata couldn’t see what expression she had. When she turned around to face him, she was wearing her usual smile.

Following Rita’s advice, Sorata looked intensely at the Nyaboron drawing on the wall. This time, Sorata closed his eyes to try imagining the finished image and he opened his eyes to sketch it out.

As he drew two and three cuts, he slowly got used to it.

“Could I be a genius?”

“So even Sorata makes unfunny jokes sometimes.”

For some reason, Rita was giving him the cold shoulder.

“How would you know how I feel, when you’re so good at drawing!”

Using a scanner that he borrowed from Misaki, Sorata scanned the finished parts of the story board and attached the images onto a half complete document. With this, planning for the drama parts was over.

To show the document to Ryuunosuke, Sorata sent the file via email and booted up his chatting program. Luckily, Ryuunosuke was already online.

— Akasaka, please check over the document that I just sent you.

— Got it. Wait for a bit.

Since it wasn’t long, Ryuunosuke should be able to read it through pretty quickly. And sure enough, he responded shortly after.

— Good work. So from now on, I want you to manage each of the staff members. For a game creator, high communication skills are very important. When you become a producer or a director of a big project, you need to be able to lead around hundred staff members.

— Actually, I’ve been wondering for a while.

— About what?

— What’s the difference between a director and a producer?

— It’s time for Maid-chan’s exciting lessons.

Seems like Ryuunosuke couldn’t be bothered to explain it himself.

— Maid-chan, long time no see.

— Being apart makes our love stronger, doesn’t it?

— What are you saying?

— Please forget about my failed joke just now! Since I’m a maid!

He wondered what would happen if he actually argued with the maid over the awkward joke. Although he wanted to try, he was too afraid of being attacked with

viruses.

— Anyways, when you're ready please.

— It seems like Sorata-sama have finally realized his place.

Sorata felt like Maid-chan was looking down on him more and more, but he decided to think that he was mistaken.

— For now, I'll explain it as simple as possible. The director (hereafter referred to as Dir.) leads a project while the producer (hereafter referred to as Prod.) manages the project by taking precautionary measures.

— So what's the difference?

— So when I say leading a project, they would order the staff members and exchange ideas and so forth to shape the final product to their liking. Since the Dir. has the last say in game productions and game direction, he holds a very important role.

— I see.

— Although one might think that the Dir. has to handle everything, since he has to work with the graphic designers, programmers, sound staffs and debuggers, a general knowledge of the fields are required. Also, since the developers relies heavily on group work, it is recommended to build a good relationship between the members. For these reasons, someone with high communication skills is preferred. For Sorata-sama who agitates females easily, it might be too hard (LOL)

— Am I that unlikable by girls?!

— But, it's not like you'll always be working harmoniously.

— So you're going to ignore my question.

— As the person who controls where the game is headed, you need to have a strong will to fight for your views. Even when there are clashes with other staff members, you need to be someone who will re-evaluate their views and talk over it with other members. I think that they need to act as the cornerstone of the project. Otherwise, the game will start getting off course. And eventually, the game will turn out to be a train wreck.

Well obviously, if you combine many people's ideas without being a clear direction, it would turn out to be a mess.

— I think I know what you mean.

— Of course, I'm not saying that the Dir. can do everything his way. Sometimes, they must be able to lead by force or sometimes persuade and convince the team. If what the staff member is saying is right, then accepting their ideas and moving on is a lot smoother. Those relations that you build with your staff members can last a lifetime and will become a great motivation. Hearing something like 「I don't want to do what this guy says~」 would spell out the end of your career. So therefore, I think being a director is being able to have a mix of some individuality and teamwork at the same time. It's quite rare to have a person who qualifies all of the said above though.

— So, that's the ideal Dir.?

— Yes, that's what I think.

— Then what about the Prod.?

— They work away from the actual development of games and they manage the schedule, production fees, hiring necessary staffs to get the project off the ground. They sometimes manage the promotions or business sides of the game. It really depends on the company, but in general, you could say that the Dir. is in charge of the quality of the game while the Prod. is responsible for the sales. To put it in other words, Dir. needs to make the game interesting, while the Prod. needs to make the game into a hit.

— So what kinds of people are suited for the job?

— They need to have a knack for being able to read the economy with an objective view.

— There are people who can do that?

— Well, there must be one in every million or so?

— The possibility's too low!

— It's something that's commonly said, but you can't really tell what will be a hit until you sell it.

— Hm~mm

— But by the records, there seems to be a few who actually can. Ah, the certain feeling of ‘this will be a hit’ isn’t only limited to Prods For example, there seems to be people in the show biz who can actually tell if their audition was successful or not. And there feelings usually come true apparently.

— Sense Of Success! [19]

— Please don’t tell jokes.

Maid-chan was being stern. She could tell jokes, yet I can’t...

— But there must be people who do both roles of the Prod. and the Dir. right?

— Yes, there are. But to be honest, depending on the people or the company, it’s not like there’s a definite difference between the two. In some cases, the Dir. might take charge of management while the Prod. orders the developers around. It’s more of a case by case thing.

— I thought so.

—So it helps to read some published interviews while thinking about who the person actually is. Since there are some Prods who tries to take credit for a game that they haven’t actually done much developing work for. I hope you keep that in mind from now on.

— Ye~s

— Great. That’s it for Maid-chan’s lessons.

“Sorata, who are you talking to?”

Rita asked after looking at the screen halfway through the chat.

“With Maid-chan.”

And Sorata explained about Maid-chan as quickly as he could before he was misunderstood by Rita. About how it was originally an automated reply AI that Ryuunosuke, his next door neighbour, made but now it was developed further to be able to converse.

“When you say next door, do you mean that girl with a low encounter rate?”

“He’s a guy! Also, where did you even learn that term!”

Was this the effects of gaming?

"What are you saying, I won’t be fooled by that.”

“Even his name is Ryuunosuke- he’s definitely a guy.[20]”

Rita was still suspecting him.

“Do you want to check him in the showers tonight?”

“Can I?”

Although he was just joking, Rita appeared to be slightly happy.

— Kanda, its work. Come to my door.

Speak of the devil indeed. Sorata got out to the hallway as he was told. In front of the door next to his room, there was a fridge shaped object. Ryuunosuke was obviously nowhere in sight. It didn’t make much sense, but it’s not like Ryuunosuke would do something for no reason. So Sorata lifted up the fridge with all his strength and carried it to his room.

Sitting down in front of his PC, Sorata asked Ryuunosuke.

— I don’t remember ordering a fridge?

— That’s going to be our game development hardware. Leave it next to your PC.

Sorata did what he was told.

“What Sorata’s doing is very suspicious.”

It really must be- since he was moving as he was told by the chat.

Sorata carefully moved the fridge next to the PC.

“But why is it so big!”

It was a lot bigger than what he had imagined it to be. It was 10 times bigger than his assumption. There was the hardware logo printed on the side.

Leaving his surprise behind, Sorata followed Ryuunosuke's on screen instructions to set the system up. He plugged the cable into the power plug, connected the LAN lines, as well as the webcam and the microphone into the USB ports.

It was completed in a matter of minutes.

He turned on the hardware. Shortly, the device's boot screen came up on the TV. Unlike commercial versions, it had no unnecessary pre-loaded softwares so it looked fairly simple. Also, the saturation was slightly different.

He continued to receive instructions from Ryuunosuke. First, he had to download the necessary data from the Sakurasou server in Ryuunosuke's room onto Sorata's PC. Then, he had to add on the program file of「Galactic Cat Nyarobon」that Ryuunosuke developed.

— It should load when you click the exe file.

When he followed Ryuunosuke's instructions, Sorata saw a bunch of alphabets flying through the screen. It looked like the data was being transferred.

It was Rita who noticed the change on the TV monitor first. Sorata followed Rita and looked at the TV.

A 3D model of Nyaboron that Misaki developed showed up on top of a polygon floor.

"Ohh, it works!"

— It's too early to be surprised.

— You can see us?! You can hear us?! Have you wiretapping us? Is this wiretapping?!

— It's pretty easy to guess your generic reactions.

— Ah, is that so?

— It should be complete if a message saying「Recognized」comes up when you stand in front of the camera.

He placed the webcam, which was plugged into the gaming hardware, on top of the TV. After stepping slightly away from it, a message popped up saying ‘Scanning’ and after around 3 seconds, the「Recognized」message came up.

But he didn’t know what he had to do next. It was because he couldn’t read the instructions when the PC was away from him. So he moved away from the TV and typed on the keyboard.

— It’s annoying, so come to my room!

— I curtly refuse.

— I can’t see the PC screen if I’m in front of the webcam!

— Then ask someone else for help. Isn’t there anyone else in the room?

— There’s Rita.

— You mean the freeloader who’s always wearing a forced smile?

Sensing the odd choice of words from Ryuunosuke, Sorata looked at Rita. She met his gaze and smiled back. The smile appeared to be authentic and natural to him.

— It doesn’t look forced to me.

— Are your eyes just there for decoration? You know nothing about women.

Sorata not knowing about women as well as Jin was certainly true, but he didn’t expect to hear that from Ryuunosuke.

For now, he moved back in front of the webcam.

“Rita, would you mind reading out the instructions that Akasaka sends in?”

Answering with a yes, Rita looked at the screen.

“It says「When you raise both of your hands up high, beams should shoot out from its eyes.」”

Sorata raised both of his hands up high, and Nyaboron on the screen shot out bluish beams from its eyes.

“Whoa, this is awesome!”

“It also says「When you clap continuously in that pose, the beam gets thicker.」”

So, he started to clap in that position.

“Sorata looks like a toy monkey[21]. Ah, that was my own thoughts.”

“Keep your thoughts to yourself!”

As he clapped faster, the beam gradually got thicker and thicker. But eventually, when he clapped as fast as he could, a puff of smoke came out from Nyaboron’s face. Apparently, it was overheating.

Since the voice recognition had been added on as well, it transformed into the paw cushion kick mode when Sorata yelled ‘Nyaboron!’, and when he yelled ‘Do your best!’ it waved to the screen.

The basic battle parts were already programmed. Sorata couldn’t wait for it to be completed.

“This is really great. The precision of the recognition program is not a joke as well. I didn’t imagine it to work this well.”

After admiring it, he stepped away from the webcam.

Rita moved away from the PC for him, and Sorata reported back to Ryuunosuke.

— I’m glad that we’re sailing smoothly for now.

Leaving behind his satisfactory comment, Ryuunosuke logged out.

When Sorata stretched his body, he spotted Rita and thought of something.

“By the way, why did you come to my room?”

“I came to discuss about our date tomorrow.”

“So we’re really doing it.”

“Did you think that I was joking? I was really excited for it…. I’m upset now.”

Rita tucked in her chin and looked up at Sorata with puppy eyes on purpose. It was super effective against Sorata's compassionate heart.

"Ah, that's not it, it's not like that at all. It's not like I forgot or wanted to forget about it, it's just that I thought if it was really OK for me to go on a date with Rita… or something like that!"

"You don't need to deny it so desperately. I know how you really feel, Sorata."

Rita smiled like it was funny. It felt like she had him in the palm of her hand.

"So what are we doing tomorrow? I haven't thought of anything."

"Please don't worry about it. I was the one who proposed the date, so I have it planned out."

"I see."

"Yes, I planned it out ambitiously, so please look forward to it."

Saying that, Rita started to search around Sorata's room. She checked every single laundry, opened up the closets without his permission and started to go through the clothes while humming.

"Let me tell you now, but going through a guy's closet without his permission only happens in games."

But in some foreign games, you could get shot…

"If you're wearing something not suited to our date place, it would be embarrassing for both of us."

"Where are we going? I want you to tell me now, if possible!"

"That's a secret."

Rita held her finger to her lips and smiled mischievously. Even her doing that was a sight to see. Finally, Rita chose a simple white shirt and a pair of dark grey denim pants that gave off a calm feeling.

"Wear these tomorrow, otherwise, I can't guarantee Sorata's safety."

“Where the heck are you taking me!”

“Please try it on now just in case.”

Rita reached out for Sorata’s waist and tried to take off his trainers.

“It’s dangerous, so get your hands off! Something will pop out!”

“I’ve seen a lot of them on sculptures and such, so I’m used to it.”

“I’m not used to showing it to people though!”

In a matter of seconds, Sorata was cornered to a corner of his bed.

“A sense of acceptance is also important for males.”

“What do you want me to accept in this situation!”

“Just take these off!”

Rita continued pulled the pants down recklessly. At this rate, his boxers would be pulled off as well.

“Whoa~, don’t pull! It’ll pop out! I think it really will!”

“I won’t comment on it, so don’t worry about it.”

“If you really do comment on mine, I’ll go nuts! Someone save me!”

“Sorata, can I come in?”

Unfortunately, Mashiro came into his room.

“What are you doing?”

“What does it look like?”

“It looks like you’re getting eaten.”

“But I’m still pure!”

For a moment, Rita let go of Sorata’s pants.

Mashiro looked at Rita with a threatening gaze. Mashiro actually showing a great amount of emotion was rarely seen. No, this could be the first time.

“What’s the matter, Shiina?”

“Nekosuke and Nekoko design.”

In the sketchbook that Mashiro stretched out, there were the designs for the drama parts. They were drawn in three different directions- front, side and back.

The characters looked younger than the characters that Mashiro usually drew in her shoujo manga. It was amazing how she was able to be so versatile with her designs. What were on the pages had the potential to be enjoyed by the young and old at the festival.

“What did Misaki-senpai say?”

“She hugged me. She said「It’s love!」.”

“Then it’s perfect.”

“Is this all that’s needed?”

“Yeah, I think it’s fine.”

When he looked up, he’s eyes met Rita’s. Thinking that Rita wanted to take a look as well, Sorata stretched out the sketchbook to her.

“I’m not interested.”

Rita coldly replied and looked away.

Suddenly the sound of a phone vibrating interrupted them.

“Sorata, you’ve got a phone call.”

“Huh? Ah, could you pass it please?”

Mashiro picked up the phone on the table. But for some reason, she flipped the phone open, pressed the answer button and held the speaker to her ear like it was her own phone.

“Yes?”

At her bold attitude, Sorata forgot how to react to that.

“I am Mashiro Shiina… I live with… Sorata. Hmm… master…”

“What are you saying to a person you don’t even know!”

Mashiro looked at Sorata.

“You said pass it.”

“Yeah, to me!”

“Japanese is too hard.”

“You’re even more hard to understand!”

She handed the phone to Sorata.

“She told me to pass the phone to you.”

Begrudgingly, Sorata took the phone.

“Hello?”

「Onii-chan, what’s going on!」

At the sudden yell from the speaker, Sorata held the phone away from his ear. He was already expecting it and the caller was his little sister Yuuko, as expected.

“I thought you were going to burst my eardrum.”

「I called to see if you were doing well! I want a satisfactory answer from you!」

“It’ll take too long to explain it…”

「Are you living a life full of love and dreams together with that girl just now?! And what does she mean, master…. If she says master…. Doesn’t it mean that you already stepped over the boundaries!」

Behind Yuuko’s voice, Sorata heard his father (who Sorata wished that he wasn’t

related to) saying「What? Living together?」,「And even master!」,「Sorata you bastard!」,「How I envy him!」,「W-wait, dear!」,「You're the only one for me, so put that kitchen knife back!」, but he ignored those comments since now wasn't a good time for it. If his mother did indeed deal out the punishment onto his father, then he could check for it in the newspaper tomorrow.

"Listen carefully Yuuko. We're not exactly living together. We're not going out and she's not my girlfriend."

「But if you're her master! That means that she's your pet?」

"Don't think of it like that. I'm telling you that it's not."

「Then you're just sharing a physical relationship together?!」

"… Yuuko, do you even know what you're saying?"

「I-I do! They even held a class about it with all of the girls together. Even my body is developing as a woman!」

"Umm, I really don't know how to react to that as your brother."

「You should be happy!」

"Are you going to make me have a sister complex…"

「That's right!」

"Don't agree to it so willingly!"

「Che~」

"Acting like that makes you seem even younger, so stop that. You're going to be a high school student next year, right? I'm really worried about you."

「S-Shush! So it's not OK if we're blood related? Do you want us to be step-siblings?」

"Being step-siblings could be better, but you'd still be my little sister."

「You just denied my very existence! I don't like it at all, so I'm going to be drenching

my pillow tonight. Anyways, Onii-chan, I'm against you two living together!」

"No, just listen to me…"

With a beep, his little sister hung up on him.

"Why won't people around me continue to listen until I've finished talking…"

"Who was it just now?"

Mashiro asked with a serious expression.

"So Sorata is fine with any girls?"

"What are you saying! She's my little sister Yuuko. My blood related sister! She calls every now and then from Fukuoka."

"To lay your hands on your sister as well, Sorata must be a desperate person…"

"Don't actually mean it when you say that!"

However, Rita wouldn't listen to Sorata' retort. She was yawning loudly.

"If you're tired, go and sleep. It would be bad for your skin if you don't."

"You're right. Since tomorrow is our long awaited date."

With a questionable smile, Rita left the room. With her lips clenched shut, Mashiro stared at she as she left.

"Shiina, you should sleep as well."

"…"

"Shiina?"

"Tomorrow."

"What?"

"Be careful."

“For what?!”

“So that you don’t lose something precious.”

“Do you really think that I would sit still if it’s stolen? Don’t worry, I’m not that weak.”

“And you can’t steal it as well.”

“You don’t need to worry about that. I’m not talented in that field.”

Sorata felt bad about himself as he said that.

“Then I’m glad.”

“Alright, so go to sleep, Shiina.”

“Yes. Good night.”

Mashiro turned around at the doorway and waved slightly. With his head down shyly, Sorata waved to her as well.

She has her own things to worry about, but it felt like Mashiro didn’t recognize her own problems before her. As soon as Mashiro left the room, it felt like a hole had opened up in Sorata’s heart. He could see her again when tomorrow comes. But that would no longer be the case if Mashiro goes back to England. Would the hole inside his heart become bigger and bigger?

Without letting his emotions surface, or without coming face to face with them, Sorata reached out for the sketchbook on the table.

“It’s not like I’m trying to create memories.”

Making up his mind, Sorata got back to work.

Part 5

The next day was Sunday and Sorata left Sakurasou with Rita when she came to his room to pick him up.

They caught the familiar train together at the station and headed to Shinjuku. Arriving there, they changed onto a red coloured subway and headed to no other than Ginza- an area full of adults.

As soon as they stepped onto the platform, Sorata got nervous and started to get tense.

People around them were well over their age and there were no high school students in sight. Without being bothered by it at all, Rita weaved in and out of the crowd. Sorata was glad that he wasn't dressed so casually like he does when he goes to get the groceries. So this was why Rita dressed him up so much.

In Rita's case, she was wearing the same clothes that she wore when she arrived at Sakurasou- her only set of clothes that were actually hers. Under the neat blouse, her curves were well emphasised and she wore a high waist styled pleated skirt. Without any discomfort, she blended in well among the crowd like a daughter of a rich household who was out for shopping. If so, was Sorata meant to be a butler who carries the items that she buys?

"U-uh, Rita-ojousama? Why don't you tell me where we are heading to now?"

While they were turning a corner into a narrow back alley, Sorata asked Rita ahead of him.

With her blonde hair blindingly fluttering, Rita turned around.

"We're nearly there, so just be quiet and follow me."

Using a generic rich girl speech tone on purpose, Rita smiled like it was funny. And Sorata didn't miss the fact that Rita was actually glancing over his shoulders. By reflex, he turned around by reflex and checked left and right. Although he looked at his surrounding intensely, Sorata couldn't sense anyone.

He knew that someone was following them ever since they left Sakurasou. So Sorata

had been trying to spot the stalker, but he couldn't get a solid evidence of it.

What if there actually wasn't someone following them?

No, that can't be it. It was probably Jin or Misaki who were hot on their trail thinking that it was fun to watch. Nanami should be at the academy for her lessons, but it was nearly 3 o'clock…. So there was that possibility of her joining in after she finishes. The only one left was Mashiro, but he couldn't imagine how Mashiro would go about trailing them.

"Is someone there?"

"Well, who knows."

Rita smiled his question off and started walking again. But suddenly, she stopped like she just thought of something and she said,

"Since we are on a date, why don't we walk side by side? Or should we link arms?"

Being threatened with a calm voice, Sorata panicked and went to Rita's side.

But when he stood next to Rita, she suddenly grabbed his arm and Sorata's right side tensed up immediately.

"C-could you let me go?"

"This is just to prevent the stares that I've been getting from other men for now. If I show 'I have a boyfriend~' they shouldn't think dirty thoughts while looking at me."

But because of where they were, there didn't seem to be someone who would come up to them and start chatting…

"Or will Sorata save me if I get into trouble?"

Looking up at Sorata, Rita had a triumphant expression. She knew that Sorata wouldn't be able to refuse her.

Sorata used his spare hand and covered his face with it. If he didn't start reciting Pi into its decimal places, Sorata would lose control because of Rita's voluptuous breast and warmth.

“You don’t seem to be bothered by me at all, but is that really OK?”

He sounded stupid and his voice cracked.

But compared to him, Rita was quite laid back. When she used to be shivering whenever she was too close to males…

“Then would Sorata do anything to me?”

“What?”

“See, you can’t. I already know that you’re not interested in me, Sorata.”

“T-that’s not it.”

“I wonder who ran away from his own room each night when he had the opportunity to sleep with me.”

“T-that’s…”

“Normally, when a girl falls asleep in the same room as the guy, a sane guy would try to do some perverted acts. I didn’t know how to react. Am I that unattractive?”

“T-there are some cases when us guys find it too hard to attempt anything if the girl is too good.”

“Is that true?”

“I-it is!”

“So that’s why your heart’s pounding so hard.”

“T-that’s right!”

Even he could feel his heart pounding that hard.

“If so, I’ll forgive you for not trying to do me.”

“You mean I was actually allowed to?”

“Of course.”

“What?!”

“Of course you’re not.”

After being dragged along by Rita by the arm, a large building came into sight. It was built fancily with all four sides and the sides shone- giving off an elegant atmosphere. Sorata knew at once that this wasn’t a place that they were going to.

However, Rita stopped in front of that very building.

“Don’t tell me that we’re going…”

Sorata face palmed himself once more.

Just how tall was this building. It hurt his neck even trying to look up to the top.

“Uhh… this is.”

“A hotel.”

And it was a luxurious hotel.

“I thought as much.”

What is a hotel? It is a place for rest. If they were on a date, and they went to a hotel…

“Since it is our first date together… I chose this place thinking that I wouldn’t want to be interrupted…”

Rita shyly looked down.

“Uhh wait, hold on! Yep. You should really think this over!”

But Rita boldly pulled him.

“Wait! Just wait! Are you really going to take my first?”

“I’ll treat you nicely.”

“What are you saying now?! And do you even have any experience?!”

“I don’t. It’s my first… but I’ve read up on it thoroughly, so don’t worry about it.”

“Where does that confidence come from!”

“To resist in front of the hotel, please don’t make a girl look bad.”

When Rita looked at him with pleading eyes, Sorata could no longer resist. All of his strength left his body and he was pulled along by the weak Rita.

But he did try to recollect his thoughts. That’s right. I’ll just go in. I’ll just go into the hotel and do nothing. Nothing really happened at the love hotel when I slept there with Mashiro.

Without a moment of hesitation, Rita walked through the entrance of the hotel. A concierge bowed his head in greeting. As expected of the hotel- the staffs were well mannered. Although, Sorata felt awkward being greeted so politely.

Rita walked past the lobby and to the elevator by herself.

“Aren’t you going to check in or something?”

“I already called beforehand. There are no room for error when I do things.”

They got on the elevator. Sorata didn’t notice that Rita was looking at the lobby as they got on.

A pleasant sound rang out from the speaker when they reached level 2.

As soon as they stepped out from the elevator, Rita pulled hard at Sorata’s hand.

“This way. Hurry.”

Sorata nearly tripped over his feet, but he followed Rita.

“W-why all of the sudden?”

“It’s nothing important, so just follow me!”

At the end of the hallway, there was a right angled corner and Rita suddenly stopped there.

“Whoa!”

Thanks to her stopping so abruptly, he ran into Rita’s back. The wave of pain from his

nose came and Sorata's eyes started to water.

"If you're going to stop, tell me first!"

"Shush! Don't speak loudly."

Before Sorata was able to ask why, Rita covered his mouth with her hands. She put her weight behind her hands and she pushed Sorata against the wall.

Sorata didn't know what was going on at all. Rita's heartbeat could be heard as she stuck closer to him. Noticing the sound, Sorata felt restless. Rita's pretty face was right in front of his eyes. Every time she blinked, her long eyelashes were enchanting him. He wanted to touch those pink lips that were ever so slightly apart.

Without realizing it, Sorata gulped. And he was told off by Rita straight away.

Rita kept looking at the hallway that they just came from, and she had her eyes shut to concentrate on her hearing.

Wanting to know what was going on, Sorata looked in the same direction.

He could hear some footsteps. There was one, no, maybe two people. Both pairs sounded quite light. They were probably female. The sound grew closer.

It was just a matter of seconds before they approached the corner.

And just like his prediction, two people appeared from the corner.

Their eyes met.

"Ah! You guys!"

"Ehh?"

"Ah…"

Three people looked at each other in surprise.

The ones that showed up were none other than Mashiro and Nanami.

"You guys…"

Even when they were discovered, Nanami tried to turn around and go back.

“Don’t run away!”

“I-I’m not trying to.”

“Then what are you doing.”

At Sorata’s demanding stare, Nanami, wearing glasses and a hat, looked away.

“It’s just a coincidence, Sorata.”

Mashiro spoke without a single change in her expression.

“How is this a coincidence when it’s clearly been planned! Don’t be silly!”

“Idiot.”

“What are you doing.”

“…”

“Shiina?”

“Idiot.”

“Like I said, what are you doing! Anyways, where are the other two?!”

Sorata took a peek around the corner and looked around. However, Jin nor Misaki was nowhere in sight. But they must’ve been somewhere close.

Nanami kept completely silent and Mashiro was resisting with her expressionless face.

“Why don’t you fess up honestly?”

“Now now, let’s let it slide.”

Rita cut in between Sorata and Mashiro.

“We’re all here just by a coincidence, so why don’t we go together.”

“N-no, it’s alright!”

For Nanami, she just didn’t want to be embarrassed even further.

“And what do you mean, together. What are you planning, Rita?”

They were at the hotel. And the boy to girl ratio was 1 to 3.

“It was what you wanted, right Sorata?”

“Hey, that’s not possible!”

“W-what are you thinking, Kanda!”

“Then why don’t the four of us enjoy ourselves.”

“So what the heck are we doing?!”

“We’re going to the「Modern Art Exhibition」that’s being held in that hall over there of course.”

At Rita’s words, Sorata and Nanami froze in their spots.

“What did you think we were doing?”

Saying that with an obvious tone, Rita lead the way and walked towards the hall.

After paying a high school students' entrance fee of 1600 yen, Sorata, Mashiro, Rita and Nanami all went to the Modern Art Exhibition.

The reason why Sorata's feet were sinking into the floor was because of the high quality carpet. He couldn't walk stably at all. Although he didn't have to take his shoes off, he felt like he should because of the Japanese culture[22]. Or maybe he was just being silly. It was probably both.

Rita walked in front of the other three and led the way. The big hall was divided in columns for the people to walk through, and paintings encased in fancy looking cases were hung on each of the dividing sections.

The ceiling was high up and whenever Sorata took a step, his footsteps couldn't be heard. Because of the silence that was often found in libraries and the harmonious atmosphere, it made him feel nervous.

Everyone who was present in that hall were adults such as old men with long beards, ladies in traditional dresses and men in suits. Due to the place they were at, all of the exhibition-goers appeared to be wise and well-off financially.

Those people's footsteps were as laid back as streams of water and they appeared to be unaffected by the flow of time. Sorata and the rest of the group had to suppress their urge to walk ahead of the people in front of them and had to walk as slowly as possible.

He wanted to leave the place as soon as possible. While he was thinking that, the line started to thin out and they reached the wider side of the hall. There were people scattered around the place and they were admiring the paintings on the wall.

Walking into a larger area made Sorata feel even worse. There was no place for him to hide. The other people's glances at him put him at unease. He just wanted to leave quickly.

Meanwhile, Rita looked confident as ever. With her hands behind her back, she observed the paintings from close and afar. She was obviously used to places like this because she had studied art before.

But Sorata didn't even know what he should even be admiring.

“I’m getting a bit nervous.”

The one who whispered that to his ear was Nanami.

“That’s amazing, Aoyama. I’m getting really nervous.”

“Sorry. I’m as well.”

Nanami hunched down because of the nervousness. The two of them, being unfamiliar being in places like this, huddled together and supported each other.

Mashiro was looking around when she stopped to look at one painting quite closely. Rita looked at the very same painting. She didn’t lift her eyes off it.

So Sorata stood next to them and looked at the painting as well. And so did Nanami.

To be honest, Sorata didn’t know why Mashiro stopped to look at the painting. It displayed a snowy street. The setting seemed to be somewhere in Europe. It was a great work. It was great, but there weren’t anything else that came into mind. It really showed how much he knew about artworks. Nanami seemed to be agreeing with him and put on a bitter smile.

“Sorata, and Nanami. There’s a painting that I want to show you. Come this way.”

Rita whispered to Sorata and Nanami and they followed her. Mashiro didn’t move from the painting. Following Rita, she led Sorata and Nanami to the centre of the hall. It was the place where the centrepiece of this exhibition was.

There was a huge painting there. It was a painting of a beach. It was slightly different from the beaches in real life and the painting seemed to be alive.

At the start, it felt like any other great painting. But after looking at it for a bit longer, he could sense the sea smell. The sound of waves drifted into his ears and he could feel the sound with his whole body.

Slowly, all senses left his toes- as if his body was getting paralyzed and being swallowed up by the ocean.

After being swallowed up by the water, what was waiting for him was a gentle embrace. The gentle waves ticked his all over his body and eventually seeped into his

skin.

Like it was touching his nerves directly, an electric shock spread out through his body and he shivered in pleasure. He could almost feel his pores opening.

Surprisingly, he wasn't sweating though.

Continuously blinking without meaning to, he noticed the painter's name.

When he first saw the name, he didn't understand it.

Because it was a name that he was quite familiar with.

Mashiro Shiina.

"This is Mashiro's…"

In a dreaming like stare, Nanami blankly looked at the painting.

"This is the last painting that Mashiro drew… before she came to Japan."

Rita's voice and Nanami's voice sounded so distant to Sorata.

All of his attention was solely focused on Mashiro's painting. It was truly spectacular.

Sorata was oblivious when it came to appreciating art pieces and art skills. However, the painting before his eyes was carved deep in his heart.

He saw Mashiro's paintings before on the net, and he was impressed back then as well. There was something about the paintings that drew him closer. The feeling inside Sorata's heart was even more than how he felt before. His feelings were trying to break out. It was trying to jump into the artistic world.

"No way."

His honest words described his feeling quite precisely.

Suddenly, Rita pulled his arm to let the person behind him get a better view.

However, he couldn't quite get a hold of his own body.

"These are all Mashiro's?"

Sorata awoke from his half-dazed state thanks to Nanami's voice.

All of a sudden he was in front of a glass case. 'Ah, I see. So that's why Rita brought me here.' Inside the glass case, there were various foreign newspaper articles and magazines inside.

On those displayed pages, there were pictures of a young Mashiro. In that picture, there was Mashiro and the previous prime minister of England. There was also a picture of Mashiro next to a famous Hollywood director. There were other pictures of her standing next to soccer players, actors and other celebrities smiling next to her.

Sorata stepped back from the glass case and looked at Mashiro's painting again. Most of the people there didn't walk pass the painting without stopping to admire it. It was like seeing butterflies fly towards a sweet smelling flower. It was interesting to see.

An aged lady was looking at Mashiro's painting. She didn't even blink. Sorata could tell that her mind was captured by the painting. After all, he was feeling the same way just before as well. With a cry of exclamation, tears formed around the corners of her eyes. She didn't even try to wipe them away. She probably didn't notice it.

There was a feeling that Sorata didn't recognize deep inside his heart. So he still didn't know how he could describe it. All that he could think of right now was the word that Rita mentioned before….

"So this is what it means to be overwhelming."

"Can you understand a bit more about her? About Mashiro."

Rita's eyes were fixed on Mashiro, who was looking at a painting on the wall. Sorata could sense that Rita had a heavy heart behind her expression.

"If all this is only 'a bit more', then I don't think I can handle the full truth…"

And Sorata was being honest. Nanami bit down on her lips.

"I really think that Mashiro will shine in the artistic world. So why don't the two of you cooperate with me? To persuade her to go back to England."

"But why did you teach Mashiro how to use a computer?"

Instead of answering Rita, Sorata asked a question instead. Maybe he just wanted to

change the topic.

“Rita knew that she wanted to know so that she could draw manga, right?”

“I’ll answer that with a question myself. If it was Sorata, would you have the determination not to teach her?”

Rita stared directly into Sorata’s eyes.

“… I… would’ve taught her.”

Sorata managed to squeeze out that answer.

“Would you do it because you want her to do her best to become a mangaka? Or because you would give in to her nagging? Or maybe it’s because you just want to?”

At Rita’s surprisingly cheerful voice, Sorata couldn’t exactly laugh it off. The question challenged his deepest thoughts.

“Because I don’t think I can handle it.”

“….”

A hint of nervousness was mixed with Rita’s sigh. Nanami looked down in silence.

“Because if there’s someone like me who’s just in the way of someone like Shiina…”

Keeping his aching heart in check, Sorata tried hard to speak without having his voice breaking.

“Only half of it is correct.”

“Why now? Why are you trying to take her back now? Isn’t it better for you, Rita, now that she’s actually a mangaka?”

“That’s why you’re only half correct- because you don’t know the full reason. But that would be better for you, instead of staying by Mashiro’s side and finding out the whole truth. So please work with me. To bring Mashiro back to England.”

“Like that’s possible. Mashiro doesn’t want that.”

It was Nanami who answered first.

“But isn’t it better for Nanami if Mashiro returned to England?”

“How do you mean?”

“Is it really OK if I say it?”

Rita glanced at Sorata.

“…”

Nanami’s glare at Rita became sharper.

“I hope you understand.”

“Stop kidding me… I don’t think so at all.”

“Then how do you feel? About the painting that you’ve seen here today.”

“That’s… something that Mashiro should decide.”

“You’re not answering the question. Also, it seems like you’ve noticed your thoughts while you were speaking.”

“… I’m telling you that I’m not.”

Nanami turned away from Rita and ran towards Mashiro.

“What a pity. I was rejected. It would be nice if Sorata cooperated with me.”

“Why must you say that to me?”

He knew that persuading Mashiro was impossible. He couldn’t possibly have the power to do so.

“I think that Mashiro would listen to your words, Sorata.”

“Stop joking.”

Sorata didn’t want to show his troubled face, so he looked down.

There was no way that Sorata’s words would actually reach Mashiro. There hasn’t been a time when it happened either. And that day, at that place, Sorata felt that no

words would reach Mashiro. He could just tell by looking at the painting.

The value of the art was impossible to understand. He didn't know how much Mashiro's painting was worth. However, he started to believe in what Rita had said before- about Mashiro being able to leave paintings behind that would go down in history.

And this was why he couldn't understand Mashiro at all.

Even when she possesses amazing artistic skills, and she's being well recognized as a painter, why won't she choose to walk this road? What was Mashiro working for while working so hard with her manga? Even when she doesn't really need to.

For Mashiro, it exists. The world known as paintings. Her own private world…. Something that she can claim to be hers…. She already had everything that Sorata and many other people desired for.

If Sorata had Mashiro's talents, he would have chosen that path without a second thought.

At his own inspirational thoughts, Sorata raised his head in surprise. Rita was no longer near him. She was looking at a different painting. It could've been her own way of giving Sorata some space to think.

"… So that's it."

Sorata's chaotic thoughts came together to form a single piece. Strangely enough, Sorata started to feel peaceful. It felt like he was viewing himself objectively.

— Mashiro must return to the artistic world.

That was the conclusion Sorata arrived at.

Chapter 3 - I Really Hate It Because I Love It With All My Heart

Part 1

“This isn’t good.”

Sorata heard a disheartened voice coming next to him as he was opening his lunchbox.

It was a warm day without any cold winds and the refreshing autumn sky was visible. As they reached the last week of September, the damp traces of summer disappeared and they’ve been enjoying some nice weather over the last few days.

It was slightly chilly during the mornings and the afternoon, so some students started to wear the winter uniform instead of the summer ones. Out of the Sakurasou members who were gathered at the rooftop, Mashiro and Nanami were wearing love sleeves.

“What’s wrong, does the tomato taste bad?”

Ryuunosuke was eating a tomato whole as he scrolled down the laptop screen.

“Tomatoes are always good. I wouldn’t describe them as bad. Don’t insult tomatoes- their existence is what I trust in the most.”

When he said that with a serious expression, Sorata was taken back.

“I find your insults to tomatoes insulting.”

“That aside, what’s not good then?”

Looking like they’re out on a picnic, Jin was getting the lunch box from Misaki as they sat on top of a vinyl sheet. Misaki has been packing lunches for Jin every day. Just by looking at their natural actions, one might think that those two were actually going out. Sorata could understand why Nanami still looked at the two in wonder.

The day was Monday, the start to a new week. They had decided that this day every week lunch time would be used to discuss about their progress on their culture festival project- 「Galactic Cat Nyaboron」.

The only reason why they were having meetings at school was because Ryuunosuke would shut himself in his room as soon as he came back from school.

The six members consisting of Sorata, Mashiro, Nanami, Misaki, Jin and Ryuunosuke sat around in a circle.

“What’s not good is this.”

Ryuunosuke turned the laptop screen to the centre of the circle and the rest of them peered at it.

What was on the screen was the production schedule.

It was divided realistically by Ryuunosuke, the programmer’s, views as six different parts: planning, scenario, graphics, program, script and sound.

They started on the 9th of September and they had around 2 months to produce it. With the two months that they had, they separated the time into 3 different phases.

The first phase started from the 8th of September and lasted for 2 weeks for the 「Testing Phase」 where they test the hardware for the game. The plot write-up and character design fell under this phase as well.

The second phase was the 「Developing Phase」 where they had around a month to work with. During that time, they had to aim to complete the graphics as well as the sounds so that they could test run the game by the end of the phase. The 「Finalizing Phase」 was scheduled to start by the 20th of October.

Currently, they safely finished the first phase and were a week into the second phase.

“Aren’t we on schedule with it?”

Nanami asked with a questioning expression.

“To be blunt, we’re 2 days behind the schedule with the drawings for the dramatic parts.”

“I’ll try to hurry.”

Said Mashiro as she poked some fried eggs into her mouth.

“At the moment, we’re already producing high quality work at a fast pace. It’s not realistic to speed it up any further by yourself. The number of cuts isn’t something that can be done single-handedly in the first place. We either need to get some extra help

or cut back on the number of scenes. It's dangerous to do anything without a solid plan. And this work would be meaningless when the culture festival is over."

"I won't cut back."

Mashiro was standing up to Ryuunosuke.

"But…"

Mashiro cut him off.

"I want Nyaboron to be perfect."

"…"

At that moment, everyone in the room could relate to what Mashiro had said- because this time could be the last chance that they have together.

Turning around without much thought, Sorata and Nanami's eyes met. She had her lips clenched shut.

"It looks like it's time for me to step up! I'll assist Mashiron~!"

Finishing her lunch without anyone noticing, Misaki said that as she eyed Sorata's side dishes.

"With Kamiigusa-senpai handling the modelling work, you won't have enough time. Also, we have motion capturing this week, so you need to do the effect works."

"Then we need reinforcements! We need to recruit some members!"

Misaki reached out for Sorata's lunch box with her chopsticks to steal a piece of fried chicken and she ate it happily. Sorata didn't even get a chance to say anything.

"But it won't be easy trying to recruit someone."

"I don't think that there's anyone in the school who would like to be involved with Sakurasou in the first place."

Nanami uncomfortably smiled.

"And the talented people would've already been scouted by other people."

Sakurasou members weren't the only ones who were aiming to participate in the culture festival. Also, with the classes starting to prepare for the culture festival, everyone was short-handed.

There was around a month left until the festival, but the whole school was already buzzing with excitement.

And thanks to the festival preparations, there were already numerous couples that were formed prior to the start. Suimei High School had a culture of exchanging different coloured school badges between couples, so one could clearly see whether or not the person had a partner.

Even in Sorata's class, there were a number of students who decided to go out with one another as they prepared for the culture festival. He just hoped that he didn't have to see many students who break up and sulk in a corner of the class before the actual start.

"That's the main problem."

At Sorata's input, Jin nodded his head. Even the genius Misaki had to think for a while. She should know better than Sorata that what Mashiro said wasn't possible.

"There is."

"There's what?"

"Is there a suitable person?"

Nanami rephrased her question.

"Yes."

That was surprising. Was it someone from her art class?

"Who is it?"

With everyone's attention on her, Mashiro said the person's name.

"Rita."

"Ah. That's right…"

So there was that option! If it was Rita, she shouldn't be busy and she certainly had the skills. Sorata had seen the drawings that Rita drew before for the storyboard. It was something to be expected- seeing that she studied alongside Mashiro ever since she was young. The way that she drew the lines and her techniques were completely different to an average person.

However, there was just a problem.

"But she mentioned that she stopped drawing a long time ago."

There must've been a serious reason for her to stop drawing even when she was so good at drawing. And it wasn't hard to figure out that the issue involved Mashiro in a big way.

"Rita wouldn't give up on art so easily."

"But, she said that she gave up with her own mouth…"

"She wouldn't give it up for the world."

"Why do you think so?"

"Because Rita loves to draw."

Hearing that simple answer, Sorata didn't know what to say next.

"It sounds like her skills are top notch."

Ryuunosuke took his eyes off the laptop screen and turned it around for the others to see.

What was on the screen was a Wikipedia page. On the heading, it said 'Rita Ainsworth.'

Although it was difficult to understand as it was translated from English to Japanese by a computer software, it was enough to understand the gist of it.

There was a photo of Rita next to her painting that won an art competition.

Seeing that, Sorata asked an obvious question.

“This means that she’s already a pro?”

“Sorata, are you serious?”

Mashiro gave Sorata a pitiful look.

“You haven’t seen it?”

“Seen what?”

“What are you talking about?”

Mashiro looked at Sorata and Nanami with a blank look. Not knowing what was going on, Sorata and Nanami looked at each other in confusion.

“Rita’s drawing was at the art exhibition.”

“What?”

“No way!”

Sorata and Nanami were both surprised.

“What were you two looking at?”

Mashiro was speaking as if Rita’s painting outshone any other paintings in that exhibition. But Sorata couldn’t remember anything noteworthy. He could only think of Mashiro’s painting.

Rita never mentioned anything about her painting. But maybe she just didn’t want to mention it.

Sorata could clearly remember Mashiro’s painting, but he didn’t even know if he had seen Rita’s work. There weren’t anything that popped into Sorata’s head either. It was pretty clear that the difference between Mashiro and Rita’s skills was quite large.

“Well, it’s true that we don’t have anyone else to ask. We just need to ask Rita first. If she doesn’t agree to help us, we’ll cut back on the scenes. Agreed?”

At Jin’s words, everyone fell silent.

“For now, I’ll try to think of some parts that can be omitted. I’m pretty free during my

lessons anyway."

It looked like Nanami wanted to interrupt Jin.

But before she could speak, Jin changed the topic.

"So, anything else that we need to discuss for today?"

"Ah, there's something that I need to say about getting permission."

Nanami quietly raised her hand.

"Ohh, as expected of Nanami! So you got their permission?"

"No, but they asked for our proposal and explain it. If there are no problems with that, then they said that they would allow us to participate."

"So they're asking for a presentation in front of the culture festival committee?"

Nanami had been looking at Sorata for a while. Sorata had a bad feeling about it.

"No, it has to be in front of the culture festival committee, student council of Suimei High School and the university."

"Ehh!"

To think that it involved the student council for both the high school and the university.

"Isn't this great, Sorata? There's something that you can do as our director."

Jin's eyes were laughing behind his glasses. It was having a great big laugh.

"The time is after school tomorrow and the place is the student council meeting room of the Suimei High School."

"Ehh, tomorrow? What about the time to prepare?"

"It's no big deal. If the presentation flops, all we've lost is revealing our plans to all of them and being banned from the theatre room. So we would need to work extra hard to secure a good spot for the viewing, but don't worry about it. It's not a big deal at all."

“Don’t pressure me!”

He now had to spend all his time during the afternoon classes to prepare a presentation for the day after. Nanami would help him to go over… it.

New tasks to do were popping up all over the place. There wasn’t enough time to think over things one by one. For now, the most urgent thing to do was to prepare for tomorrow, and ask for Rita’s cooperation.

As he was closing his now-empty lunch box, the school announcement rang out.

「Attention please.」

It was a voice from a female student from the broadcasting club.

「3rd year Jin Mitaka, please report to the teacher’s office immediately. Takatsu-sensei is looking for you. I repeat…」

The same announcement rang out twice.

When it became quiet again, Jin got up.

Sorata looked up at Jin, but he sent a subtle signal for Sorata to keep quiet. Takatsu-sensei was in charge of career pathways. He must’ve wanted to talk about external entrance examinations for sure.

“This is unfair, the two of you! Let me be part of it if you’re going to talk with your eyes~!”

They were found out by the quick witted Misaki.

“Why did he call you out for?”

Misaki asked the obvious question.

“Who knows. Well, I can’t ignore him. I’ll be off now.”

Jin escaped from the rooftop with those words.

“Kohai-kun, staying quiet isn’t good for you.”

Misaki pushed her head towards Sorata’s.

“Mother back at home will be crying!”

She grabbed Sorata’s collar and started to shake him back and forth. It felt like he was about to spew out his lunch.

“I-I don’t know anything!”

“Jin’s been suspicious lately~!”

“It’s just you, Misaki-senpai!”

She shook even harder.

“I think you’re hiding something~!”

The sixth sense of an alien was truly something else.

“S-Stop it please…. I… think I’ll really throw up.”

“And when he went to Ginza a while ago.”

“… What? Ginza?”

Misaki finally stopped her hands.

“So you really trailed him?”

“Of course!”

When Misaki accepted it without denying it, Sorata was lost for words. What did he need to say to a person who doesn’t feel guilty about intruding other people’s privacy…

While Sorata was scrunching his face to think of the right thing to say, Ryuunosuke closed the laptop and got up.

“If it’s Takatsuki, then it’s about career pathways.”

He even said something that was completely unnecessary.

Hearing Ryuunosuke’s words, Misaki ran out. She must be planning on following Jin.

“Ah, wait senpai!”

Sorata’s attempt was a failed one. Would it be ok? Although he didn’t know what Jin and Takatsu were going to talk about, but by overhearing the two, Misaki would find out about the external entrance exams.

— Misaki-senpai is on to you.

— I know.

As expected of the childhood friend. Jin already knew all about Misaki’s patterns.

Deciding that the meeting was now dismissed, Ryuunosuke wordlessly returned to the building.

Then, the warning bell rang.

“Shiina, you have practicals during the afternoon, don’t you? You should hurry.”

“Got it.”

Finishing up her lunch, Mashiro left the rooftop while sipping some red tea from a paper cup

Only Sorata and Nanami remained there.

Wanting to enjoy the rest of the lunch break, Sorata sat on a bench. Nanami sat at the other end of the bench.

“So Kanda knew about it as well. About Mitaka-senpai taking external entrance exams.”

“Eh? How do you know about it?”

“I found out at the start of the summer break. I was called out to discuss about my overdue fees for the dorms… and I overheard Mitaka-senpai and Takatsu-sensei talking about it in the teachers’ office.”

“… Ah, you mean on that day.”

That was the day when Sorata asked her to come and live in Sakurasou while he

brought Mashiro to school for make-up exams.

“So Kamiigusa-senpai… doesn’t know about it.”

“He said that he would tell her himself.”

“I don’t like it.”

“But we can’t really tell Misaki-senpai about it.”

“That’s true, but… I still don’t like it.”

There wasn’t much that Sorata could say to that.

After looking down at her feet for a while, Nanami looked up at the sky. Other students around them on the roof started to head to class. It was nearly time for the afternoon classes to start.

Nanami checked the time with her phone.

“Huh? So you’re using a phone again?”

“I don’t really need it, but Kamiigusa-senpai paid for the bills… so it turned out like this.”

Sorata could understand why Nanami was wearing a bitter smile.

“She really likes to do things her way.”

Their conversation paused there for now. But neither Sorata nor Nanami tried to go back to class. It was because there was still an important issue at hand.

“Do you think Rita would agree with it?”

“I don’t know.”

It seemed like Nanami had the same question in mind. She wasn’t taken back by the question, and Sorata was already expecting that.

— I don’t draw anymore… I quit drawing now…

What did Rita mean when she said that on the first night that she came to Sakurasou?

Sorata knew that Rita didn't stop because she wanted to retire. Also, he knew that she didn't stop because she wanted to… Also, it was clear that Mashiro played a role for Rita to stop drawing.

"I want to believe that happiness comes from doing what you want to do."

"Aoyama, what would you do if you had a big talent apart from acting? For example, like Shiina?"

Nanami looked towards Sorata.

"Are you going to ask for Rita's cooperation?"

"Shiina won't be shaken by what I say."

"I'm not asking about that."

"I know. But there are times when you don't want to say anything."

Saying that, Sorata feared that he had just admitted his own feelings. Even when there's a chance for a comeback, it felt like he had just denied the possibility for one….

"But… I think Rita wants you to ask her."

"Yeah, you might be right."

The only reason Sorata agreed with Nanami was to fool himself. But he couldn't say that he thought otherwise.

The bell for the start of afternoon classes rang. Nanami got up from the bench and Sorata did the same. He peered at the sky for a moment- as if he was searching for something. But all that he saw were dark rain clouds that appeared to pour down quite soon. It mirrored Sorata's feelings deep inside his heart.

Sorata took his eyes off the sky and ran inside the building- as if he was fleeing from his own heart.

Part 2

Although it was quite rare, but after school, Sorata, Mashiro, Nanami and Ryuunosuke all came back home together.

“Looks like it’s going to rain.”

Nanami said as she looked up at the sky.

The sky wasn’t that cloudy during lunch time, but now, the blue sky wasn’t visible behind the dark stormy clouds. Thanks to the clouds, the atmosphere was dark and chilly.

And their mood was being affected by the gloominess.

They were walking on an uphill road that was a part of their route to Sakurasou when they spotted Rita ahead of them. It seemed like she was coming back home after shopping for groceries. She was wearing an apron while holding a plastic bag in her hands.

“Rita!”

When Sorata called out her name, she turned around on the spot and looked behind her.

He quickly went to her side and took the large plastic bag from her. The bag was full of vegetables and fruits, so it was quite heavy.

“What’s for dinner?”

“I’m going to try out a dish that Jin taught me.”

Rita replied as she smiled.

The five of them, now including Rita, continued to walk back to the dorm. Walking ahead of the rest of the group, Rita was proudly talking about some recipes that she learned from Jin to Mashiro. And walking behind her, Sorata looked at Rita’s back for no reason.

Rita asked for Sorata and Nanami's help that day[23] but she hasn't asked them to do anything else since then.

She continued to act as usual: smiling at everything, playing games with Misaki, cleaning after Mashiro and doing some miscellaneous chores around the dorm.

Not knowing what Rita was up to, it made Sorata and Nanami feel frustrated. Even now, as Sorata looked at Rita's back and looked towards Nanami, they both tilted their head in confusion.

Eventually, the five of them arrived to Sakurasou.

Then Mashiro stopped Rita to request the most important event for that day.

"Rita, could you do me a favor?"

About to grab onto the doorknob, Rita slowly turned around.

"Have you decided to return to England with me?"

"No."

"That's a shame. So, what is it?"

"I want you to help me with Nyaboron."

Rita looked puzzled.

"You know that we're working on a production for the culture festival right?"

Sorata tried to help with the explanations.

"We're short-handed with it."

"So you're asking for my help?"

"We can't find anyone else to help us right now. And none of them can keep up with Shiina's quality either…. But Shiina vouched for your skills, Rita."

"…"

Rita started to think for a moment. Watching her think, Sorata felt that Rita would

agree to it.

“Please, Rita.”

Nanami asked her as well. Ryuunosuke kept silent and waited for her answer.

“If that’s what you’re asking for, then I have to refuse. I’m not good enough to match Mashiro.”

Without a single change to her expression, Rita curtly refused. She turned around and tried to open the door.

“No, that’s not right.”

“…”

“Rita is really good at drawing.”

“Please stop. I quit drawing. I decided not to draw ever again.”

“Why?”

“…!”

A sharp crunching sound could be heard. Rita had clenched her teeth shut. The unpleasant sound of teeth grinding onto each other brought in a tense atmosphere.

Rita slowly turned around. Her usual bright smile was no longer there. The cold expression chilled their surrounding rapidly.

“But Rita is good at drawing.”

“… Say that.”

“Rita?”

Sorata’s heart sank. Rita’s cheery voice… her voice was almost unrecognizable.

“Please don’t make fun of me.”

The girl in front of them could no longer be called Rita. Her usual gentle and shining

self was gone without a trace.

“I don’t want to hear it from Mashiro.”

Her tone was extremely cold and bold.

“I don’t want you to say that to me.”

Her words carried no emotions. But that stirred up Sorata’s heart. He never knew. What Rita was carrying inside her heart.

“Why…”

Mashiro extended her hands towards Rita. She was also taken back by Rita’s sudden change.

Rita eyed her friend coldly.

“Whose fault do you think this is?”

Rita smiled coldly. She was smiling she just stomped all on a beautiful flower.

“Why do you think I quit drawing?”

Every time Rita’s voice slammed itself onto Sorata’s eardrums, he instinctively was intimidated.

“This is all Mashiro’s fault.”

Rita’s glare pierced through Mashiro and Mashiro was frozen on the spot.

“… Why?”

Mashiro repeated that word like a child who was just abandoned by her mother. Like she forgot how to say anything else…

“I’m not the only one who quit art because of you, Mashiro.”

“Why…”

“So you really don’t know. That’s who we all admire to be, even when there’s a difference that’s impossible to overcome, and we all hated for the same reason-

Mashiro Shiina."

Mashiro silently blinked. The atmosphere started to freeze, with Rita as the centre.

"Do you remember that time when the whole lot of us were at grandfather's house?"

"I remember."

"Did you notice those children leaving the house one by one each month?"

"…"

"Do you know who left and when?"

"… I."

"If it's you, Mashiro, you wouldn't remember anyone's face or name."

"…"

Mashiro was silently agreeing with what Rita said.

"You really don't know anything. All you've seen are your own drawings."

"Why?"

Who many times did she repeat that word?

"I said that it's because of you. Because of you, I started to hate painting even when I liked it so much. And more than that, I started to despise it. I can't even bear to look at a canvas, an easel or even a brush anymore."

Mashiro's reflection was on Rita's wide open eyes. Mashiro's pupils were shaking in agitation.

It would be better for her to stop listening now. That would be for Mashiro's own good. However, Sorata couldn't stop Rita. It felt like his feet were stuck in the ground. He lost his ability to speak as well.

"The children who gathered at grandfather's house were different to your normal art student. They were all students from across the world who was determined to become a famous painter. They were all considered to be prodigies and geniuses in their own

countries."

Mashiro and Rita must've been the same as them at the start.

"So everyone there had the talent. They were young, but they were already artists. But when they all arrived, they learnt that they paled in comparison to a true genius…. For the first time in their lives, they met someone that surpassed their abilities…. It was a place for that though- for them to know that there was always competition. However, when they couldn't handle the pressure, they quit drawing each year. They had considered themselves to be special, but when they came face to face with the reality, they gave up. But that's nothing out of the ordinary- giving up when you fall in despair. Yes, it wasn't something that was unexpected, but since you were there…."

"I…"

"That's right. No matter how hard we tried, we couldn't be like Mashiro. We can't even reach up to your feet. Your eyes don't see people at all… just by breathing and painting, you tore everyone's dreams and hopes to pieces. You tore up everyone's hopes and dreams just like the way you are right now- heartlessly and emotionlessly. Whenever I see your paintings, this is all that comes to my mind. 'Ah, she really does live in a different world than me.' I realized what true talent is. And whenever I struggled to improve, you've gone even further than before…. Like as if you had wings on your back…"

Sorata and Nanami silently swallowed and looked at Rita. Mashiro was listening to Rita with a serious expression. Ryuunosuke only cared about the weather. It started to spit.

"The only person who remained at that house was me, when we started with over thirty students…. Everyone left because of you, Mashiro. Without even caring about it. You didn't even care if someone left…"

"…I."

"I couldn't forgive you. You, Mashiro…. So I only helped you to become a mangaka thinking that you'll disappear. I taught you how to use a computer. I helped you to prepare your trip to Japan. I only did it so that you could humiliate yourself in front of others with your boring manga and relate more to us who aren't as talented. But why did you have to debut!"

Rita glared at Mashiro with bloodshot eyes.

"… Rita, I."

Rita tried to start speaking again, but the words didn't leave her mouth.

Sorata interrupted them.

"If you really thought of it like that all this time, why did you come back now?"

He was asking an honest question

"Don't you get it, even after hearing all that I've said, Sorata?"

Rita's glare pierced through Sorata. He could feel the pain that Rita was emitting from her body even when she was trying to hold back her feelings. Sorata wanted to look away, but he couldn't. Rita had that type of phenomenon around her right now. He also knew that he wouldn't get another chance to hear the reason if it wasn't right now.

"If it was you Sorata, could you forgive her? When you tried so hard to achieve something, you thrived to succeed, how could you forgive someone who just comes in and achieves the very same thing you're aiming for with such ease? Please tell me."

"… Is that your reason?"

Sorata was clenching his fist without realizing it.

"I want Mashiro to succeed on becoming the most famous artist there is, because she has everything that I don't have. That way, I can proudly say that I studied with that Mashiro Shiina back in the days. Otherwise, what have I achieved in my life so far? I want to believe that Mashiro has to carry the responsibility. I want to believe that I played a role in Mashiro's life. Not that Sorata would understand…"

There was no way that he could understand. He never had his dreams broken before. He never went face to face with a real competitor or a true talent. So he couldn't relate to her at all. Sorata had nothing to say to Rita.

All this time, Rita's eyes would've never left Mashiro. She always would've been wary of Mashiro's talents as she watched Mashiro draw. That was why she looked up to Mashiro's talent. She wanted to reach up to her level. But she couldn't. Hence, she started to loathe her. But she couldn't hate her. She couldn't give up completely on Mashiro's talents…

This was most likely because she acknowledged and looked up to Mashiro more than anyone else.

There was nothing that Sorata could do, apart from being stared at by broken-Rita.

After being silent all that time, Ryuunosuke broke the silence.

“Freeloader, was that all you wanted to say?”

As the rain started to fall harder, Ryuunosuke coldly took out an umbrella from his bag.

“If you’re done, then move. You’re in the way.”

Still not moving away from the door, Rita looked towards Ryuunosuke coldly. Although her glare was enough to make other people freeze, Ryuunosuke was completely unaffected by the glare. Not only was he indifferent to it, it slapped a mosquito on his arm.

“If you understood what I’ve said, then move. You already took up 15 precious minutes of my working time.”

“I wasn’t talking to you, was I?”

“Then you should’ve let me go first. It’s a bother.”

“Look, Akasaka.”

Sorata tried to cut in.

But neither Rita nor Ryuunosuke was going to back off any time soon.

“You can just go through the door if you really wanted to.”

“I hate women. I don’t want to even get near one.”

“I should’ve known that a loner who’s an outsider with only mechanical friends is so different.”

Rita spoke in a way to get on Ryuunosuke’s nerves.

“I’m only saying this to make sure, but are you trying to get on my nerves?”

“That’s right. Did you just notice? Why don’t you pay a visit to the psychiatrist?”

“It seems like your brain is beyond all repair.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“I just want to tell you to think before you speak, but that might be a waste of time. Let me teach you something valuable. I trust in machines, so call them my best friend if you will. Also, I already consider myself as an outsider. What you said to me was like saying ‘You dog!’ to a dog. Those things would only work on Kanda.”

“Don’t make fun of me.”

Rita’s eyes were full of hatred and dark emotions. One could sense the enmity from her.

“Understand the situation clearly. I’m not making fun of you. I just think of you to be a bitch.”

“Uhh, I think you did make fun of her, Akasaka.”

Sorata cut in between them, but neither Ryuunosuke nor Rita tried to look at Sorata.

Rita was giving Ryuunosuke the daggers while Ryuunosuke coolly looked at her back.

“I’ll use this chance to say something. I never liked you in the first place. I was against you staying at Sakurasou anyway.”

“Hey, Akasaka. Cut it out.”

“Stay quiet Kanda. Think about what I have to deal with while looking at that girl’s forced smile every day.”

“Why do you think I’m always smi…”

“I don’t really care.”

“I’ve been painting all my life. Ever since I was young…”

Rita glared at Ryuunosuke in the rain. She wasn’t crying, but to Sorata, the raindrops falling down her face appeared like she was.

“My parents and my grandfather praised me for whatever I drew. And since it made me happy, I always tried harder to draw better than before.”

It was enough for her grandfather to invite students to his own house. Even in terms of family background, Rita was really similar to Mashiro.

“I’ve grown up hearing that I can be a great artist one day.”

Rita started to pour out her life story to Ryuunosuke.

“So? What’s your point?”

“But ever since Mashiro appeared, things started to change. At the start, I only thought of her to be a good painter….”

“Rita…”

“I thought that we were competing against each other while living under the same roof. But that was just my own dilution, and Mashiro didn’t even think of it like that. Even my parents and grandfather admitted it. I lost all sight of what I wanted to do after having my heart stolen by Mashiro’s talents...”

In a bored manner, Ryuunosuke swapped the hands that he was holding the umbrella with.

“Painting was my everything. It was all that I had. But when I was told to stop… for my own grandfather to tell me to give it up…. Telling me to give up because I can’t beat Mashiro, to give up because what I draw won’t make any difference! Yet I still stayed by Mashiro’s side even after I heard that. I know that I’m being weak… I know it, but…”

“Stop it Rita.”

“Saying that I want to play a role in Mashiro’s life, I know how foolish I sound! Please don’t make me say these kinds of things!”

She started to cry as she looked at Ryuunosuke with a scary face. However she didn’t shed any tears. She must’ve cried a river before and had no more tear left to shed, and she wasn’t feeling sad either. Sorata realized that how Rita was feeling- it was despair. She was at the end of the road where she couldn’t be rescued.

“How would you know how I feel? He nurtured my dreams while saying that I can become a great artist, and stole all of it away himself! It’s all your fault, Mashiro! Because Mashiro exists…”

Seeing Rita’s fiery actions made Sorata take a stiff step back. He didn’t know what to think about the situation. Nanami was silently getting drenched in the rain as well.

Mashiro stood there with a bitter expression.

The only one who didn’t seem to care was Ryuunosuke. He pulled out his phone and fiddled around with it. He wasn’t relating to her, he wasn’t being compassionate nor was he being sympathetic. He was just acting normal as usual.

He was completely at his own pace. He wasn’t affected by anyone’s emotions, nor was he influenced by it.

“Please say something.”

“Really? I can speak?”

“I obviously asked you because you can.”

“Then I want to ask something. From what you’ve said to us so far, how much of it was from your own heart?”

“What?”

Rita’s eyes started to shake in confusion.

“I get that you grew up with high expectations around you. And so, you tried to meet those expectations, but you found out that you couldn’t reach that standard. But from what you’ve said, it doesn’t feel like you actually wanted to do it out of your own will.”

“Please stop…”

The one who stood up saying that was Mashiro, trying to protect Rita from Ryuunosuke.

“How miserable are you going to make me….”

Rita's voice cracked as she spoke, but it sounded clear and sounded like a bird's cry.

"Do you really enjoy analyzing people like this? You're the worst!"

Swinging up her arm, Rita tried to slap Ryuunosuke. However, before she could come in contact with him, Ryuunosuke dodged the hit.

"If you really thought that that would work against me, you're gravely mistaken."

"Why you!"

The anger that had been growing inside Rita exploded.

Pushing Mashiro aside, Rita threw the plastic bag at Ryuunosuke. By reflex, Nanami catched Mashiro.

"Stop it Rita!"

However, Sorata was too late in saying that.

Contents of the bag slipped out and towards Ryuunosuke. This time, he took a step back and avoided it. Eggs cracked when they fell, flour was floating about and tomatoes got squashed.

"Apologize to the tomatoes!"

Angrier than before, Rita shouted again "You're the worst!" at Ryuunosuke and ran away. She ran away towards the path that they just came from. She quickly disappeared through the shower.

"Akasaka, we need to follow her."

"So that I can get yelled at again?"

"Of course not!"

"Then you follow her, Kanda. That's more efficient. But take the umbrella."

It must've been because of Ryuunosuke's calmness, but Sorata walked into Sakurasou as well. He was already well drenched.

"I don't like that part about you."

Ryuunosuke stopped as he walked in.

“How should I know what you mean by「that part」? Define it.”

“That ruthless attitude that doesn’t care about how the other person feels!”

“That’s quite a definition coming from you, Kanda. But it doesn’t matter. If that’s what you mean by「that part」, then it’s what I actually wanted to do. So I don’t need to correct myself.”

Saying that, Ryuunosuke went inside his room.

“H-Hey! Stop right there!”

But straight away, Sorata heard something big falling over with a loud noise.

When he looked around, he spotted Mashiro collapsed weakly.

“M-Mashiro! Are you alright?”

Nanami tried to help her up, but Mashiro’s eyes were out of focus.

“Hey, Mashiro?”

“I…”

Having arrived earlier than them, Jin and Misaki poked their heads out from the kitchen. Nanami explained the situation to the pair.

“What happened?”

“Rita hates me….”

Mashiro whispered like she was sleep talking.

“I never knew.”

Sorata couldn’t think of anything to say to her.

“I never knew.”

“Didn’t know what?”

“What Rita said, I never knew about it.”

At her words, Sorata got the chills. This was who the genius artist Mashiro Shiina was. Otherwise, Rita didn’t need to be so anguished by it. Although they learned together since they were young, even Rita couldn’t reach up to Mashiro. Mashiro was a far distant figure, and that was who she was.

“I still don’t know the reason.”

“That’s…”

“Do you know it, Sorata?”

“Not all of it, but I think I know a part of it…”

Sorata never felt as deprived as Rita. However, he didn’t want to compete against Mashiro on the same field. It was because the outcome was painfully obvious. But the reality was different. By looking at Rita, he learned that the outcome was a lot more humiliating than ever imagined and more impacting.

He could finally understand what Rita meant before.

— You’ll be broken if you stay close to Mashiro. Just like me…

That was what she meant by broken. It was to realize what despair actually was.

Even thinking about it gave Sorata the chills. He was scared.

“Tell me, Sorata.”

Looking up at him, Mashiro resembled a cat abandoned on the streets. Droplets of rain fell from her wet hair that was stuck to her cheeks.

But Mashiro wouldn’t be able to understand. After all, she still didn’t get it even after Rita expressed herself quite clearly.

“Shiina, have you ever been jealous of someone?”

Jin, Misaki and Nanami tried to overhear the conversation- to hear what Mashiro had to say…

“Been jealous of someone….”

“Like feeling ‘I wish I could be like that’ or ‘that person’s really great’ even anything like a set goal for something.”

With her head down, Mashiro fell into deep thoughts. Her expression grew darker each second.

“… I don’t know.”

As expected, that was Mashiro’s answer.

“I see.”

Sorata decided that it was impossible to explain it to her.

Grabbing both of her hands, he helped Mashiro to get back on her feet. He tried to lead her inside, but Mashiro wouldn’t let go of his hands.

“I’ll try to find her with Misaki. Could you prepare the bath, Aoyama?”

Jin slipped on his shoes.

“Ah, yes.”

“You take a bath first, Aoyama. It would be bad if you caught a cold.”

“I’ll do that.”

Still drenched, Nanami ran to the bathroom.

“You take one as well, Shiina. I’ll bring back Rita.”

Jin and Misaki walked by Sorata and went outside.

“Rita search crew, go~!”

Soon, the sound of the minivan’s engine starting up was heard.

Sorata tried to help find Rita as well, but Mashiro still didn’t let go of his hands.

“… I’ll go as well.”

“No, that’s…”

“Please.”

Hearing the drenched Mashiro say that, Sorata’s heart shook, but he couldn’t bear to say no to her. Because he would want to find Rita no matter what if he was in Mashiro’s shoes.

“OK…”

Sorata told Nanami who was in the bathroom and ran outside with Mashiro.

Even as they ran, Mashiro didn’t let go of Sorata’s hand. So Sorata lightly held onto that hand and quickly went down the slope in front of Sakurasou at a fast pace.

“It’ll work out for sure.”

He didn’t have any evidence of that. He didn’t know what would happen. Rita? Mashiro? Or maybe the pair’s relationship? What would happen…?

Thinking about it made Sorata feel even more anxious.

But he couldn’t hesitate now. He had to find Rita.

“… Yeah.”

Mashiro weakly replied.

They went by the playground. He looked around, but couldn’t sense anyone there. Afterwards, they reached a big fork road. One path led to the school, while the other lead to the shopping district and the station.

Since he couldn’t let go of Mashiro and search separately, he took the path to the station. After running for all that time, Sorata started to become out of breath. Mashiro was in the same state as him, gasping for breath painfully. However, she wouldn’t stop her two legs.

Not quite at the shopping district, Sorata spotted someone who was hunched down and leaning against a pole.

The tired outline looked like someone else, but it was surely Rita.

“You go, Sorata.”

“Is that OK?”

“Don’t know.”

“…”

“I might make Rita angry again.”

“Shiina.”

He could feel Mashiro’s hand shaking in his own.

So she was afraid.

Of being hated by Rita…

He realized how much Rita meant to Mashiro. For Mashiro to be this concerned about someone when she usually didn’t care about anyone else… That was how precious Rita was to her. Her only friend who watched her ever since she was six- for the last 10 years.

It wasn’t a situation where Sorata could be a part of. But he wanted to be of help for the two of them….

“Stay here.”

“Yeah.”

Sorata let go of Mashiro’s hand and walked towards Rita.

With each step that he took, a sound echoed out through the pools of water but it soon died out in the rain.

Rita’s blond hair now appeared to be white because of the rain.

Her clothes clung onto her body and her shoulders were shivering in the cold. It could’ve been because she was crying, but all of her tears were already used up….

Even when Sorata approached her, Rita didn’t show any reaction.

He held the umbrella over her so that she wouldn't get hit by rain.

She didn't even try to look at him. She wouldn't want him to see her in that state.

"I'm jealous of Rita as well."

There wasn't a reply.

"There's a space in Shiina's heart that is reserved for Rita. From your voice, heart and your very existence."

"…"

The sound of the raindrops created a small world for the two of them under the umbrella. All that existed there were Sorata and Rita. She shouldn't be able to hear anything else apart from Sorata's voice and the sound of raindrops.

"The Shiina that I know decides everything by herself and she doesn't pay any attention to anything else as she walks at her own pace. And by herself at that."

Rita still didn't move. Sorata wondered if she was actually able to hear him.

Nevertheless, he still had things to tell Rita.

"Recently, I thought of something, and that's Shiina is alone. Because no-one can enter her world."

"…"

"I don't think Shiina really has any close friends. I don't like that, but there's nothing I can do about it. No matter how hard I try…"

"…"

"Sorry… I'm really embarrassing myself."

Sorata slightly smiled as he said that.

"… You're right."

Rita responded to him, but she still didn't look up.

“Even though I was the one who said it, it’s still hurtful… But Rita, you’re different.”

“You’re wrong, I’m just another passing scenery for Mashiro.”

“No, that’s not it at all. I’m telling you that it’s not. I can say that with confidence.”

Rita looked up and stood up from the pole. She still didn’t have traces of tears.

“I really think that you’re great. Even living with that Shiina for ten years is commendable.”

“Hearing that from Sorata doesn’t make me any happier.”

“Usually… people would run away halfway through.”

“…”

“They look away from what they don’t want to face…. Thinking that you need to go up against it make you go defensive. Because nobody likes to be in pain.”

“…”

“It’s not like I don’t know it though… I know that something good will come out of being through the challenges. But it’s not as simple as it sounds.”

“… That might be true.”

“I want to be someone who won’t run away from those things and overcome them. Just like you, Rita.”

“Did Sorata come to me to cheer me up? Or did you come here to be cheered up?”

“I don’t even know.”

When Sorata bitterly smiled, Rita also slightly smiled.

“What type of smile is that?”

“… Probably a forced one still.”

Her smile was just a mask that she used to hide her broken self. Sorata could now understand the reason why she had to…

“I was found out by that cute boy from the start though.”

“He’ll be angry if you said that to him.”

“I see, thank you for the info.”

“Hey hey, why don’t you stop fighting with each other?”

“That’s a difficult request. Because he’s the worst of the worst.”

“It may seem like that, but Akasaka doesn’t have ill motives behind it. Just think of it as his personality.”

“That’s why he’s the worst. It’s unfair for him to be uninvolved with everything at all times.”

“I can agree with that.”

Since Ryuunosuke never cared about how anyone thought of him, whenever there was a fight, he would almost be the punching bag for verbal abuse.

“But it's as he said.”

“What is?”

“I always blamed Mashiro without reflecting on myself first. I forgot about who I wanted to become and what I wanted to do.”

“I see…”

“But I still think that he’s the worst.”

It seemed like she still had a bone to pick with Ryuunosuke.

“I see that you’re still friends with him though, Sorata.”

“Friends… isn’t quite the right term.”

“Why is that? You two are friends.”

“Well I guess we are, but how should I say this. You know how there are a few friends that you still don’t really like? It’s sort of like that.”

"…"

Rita stayed silent.

"Uhh, forget about what I just said. It sounds like I just spoke ill of him!"

"No, it was really good! You might be right. As you get to know one another, you start to see each other's faults and strengths. Accepting those as their personality is truly wonderful."

"Well, is it really?"

"But I still don't like his personality."

Rita seemed unsatisfied. It was an expression that she never showed before.

At the awkwardness of the expression, Sorata burst out laughing.

"I don't think this is something to be laughing about."

"Sorry, but I think that suits you better."

"Pardon?"

"It's great to see you smile, but I think this suits you better."

"I won't be charmed by those small talks."

"I'm not trying to charm you!"

"That's a surprise in itself. Since I'm weary, I could be charmed if you treat me gently."

"If you're saying those things, you're not weary at all!"

Rita laughed again, saying that he could be right. Was she forcing herself again?

"By the way, Shiina came with me as well."

Looking behind him, Sorata saw a bit of the umbrella sticking out of the corner.

As he looked at the umbrella, Mashiro poked half of her face out from the corner.

Making eye contact, Sorata motioned her to come.

Slightly hesitating, Mashiro came towards them. With Sorata in between the two girls, Mashiro and Rita looked at each other.

But neither of them tried to strike up a conversation.

Sorata stayed silent for them as well.

“I don’t like Mashiro.”

At Rita’s sudden words, a sense of nervousness could be seen on Mashiro’s face.

“When we lived together in the same room, you used to leave your clothes and underwear everywhere, you used to pile your broccolis onto my plate even though I hate them…”

“…”

“You left the house by yourself and got lost, I had to clean up after you all the time after you made a mess of it.”

“… I’m sorry.”

Mashiro apologized.

“You used my paints and brushes without my permission…”

“Sorry.”

“And the list can go on and on.”

“… Sorry.”

Mashiro looked down.

“And I don’t like that you don’t speak about yourself clearly.”

At those words, Mashiro clenched both of her hands.

But unlike before, she didn’t open her mouth. She didn’t even look up.

“What are you thinking? Mashiro?”

“… I never knew.”

“Knew what?”

“What Rita had been thinking.”

“What about now?”

“I still don’t know.”

Mashiro honestly shook her head.

“I thought as much. You are Mashiro after all.”

Rita appeared to be lonely.

“I never knew.”

“This is the part about you that I hate the most.”

With her lips still clenched shut, Mashiro looked up. Sorata could feel some newly found determination in her eyes.

“But I really enjoyed drawing with you, Rita.”

At Mashiro’s unexpected words, Rita’s eyes open wide.

“I never thought about anything else.”

“… Mashiro.”

“Because I didn’t consider myself to be alone when I was by Rita’s side.”

Rita quickly tensed up, as if she was trying to suppress something…

“I thought that everything would work out if I had Rita…”

“That’s…”

“But I was being too selfish.”

“That’s not it.”

Rita’s voice was barely audible.

“I’m sorry for not realizing.”

“No…”

Lead by her emotions, Rita jumped into Mashiro’s chest. She clung onto Mashiro and started to weep while burying her face in Mashiro’s chest. The tears that were thought to be all used up started to roll down her cheeks.

“You’re not!”

“Rita?”

“Mashiro wasn’t the only one! I was happy! I was happy whenever I was drawing with you as well, Mashiro!”

“…Really?”

“Yes, really! I always wanted to draw with you! But you never appeared to be happy. I was afraid… I was afraid as I watched you draw… I thought I was the only one who thought of us as friends….”

Mashiro tightly hugged Rita’s wet body.

“Rita… thank you.”

“Mashiro… Mashiro…”

“Thank you for everything until now.”

“I’m sorry Mashiro. I… I…”

“So Rita, please. Continue to…”

“I want to continue painting… I want to paint forever. I want to express everything that we have done together as paintings…. The times that we spent together are precious memories for me…. My skills developed thanks to you… so of course I don’t want to stop painting!”

“Yeah, I know.”

“Mashiro… I’m sorry.”

“Rita can draw her own paintings.”

From then on, Rita continued to cry and pour out her feelings that she’d been holding back.

Sorata realized that the two girls' heart were definitely connected. Even if they didn't express it in words, just by them drawing together, they were bonded closer than anything else in the world. That was why that bond couldn't be broken or interrupted by an outsider like Sorata, and it made people feel envious of that closeness.

It began at a large house where the ceilings were up high. And inside, there were children who were painting. At the start, there were around 30 students, but the numbers decreased one by one. In the midst of everyone's departure, the young Rita and Mashiro remained- side by side as they painted. Eventually, those two were the only ones who remained at that place. That quiet and lonely place. There were no toys. There were no sounds of laughter. It was just the two of them painting. Slowly, they started to warm up to each other, and they started to build a relationship with each other.

They were the only ones who remained, but they weren't lonely because there were the two of them. Thinking that, Sorata's eyes started to become bloodshot and he tried to cover it with the umbrella.

However, the rain started to stop and soon, it completely did.

"I need to apologize."

"Huh?"

Rita looked at Sorata with a messy face.

"To that cute looking boy."

"I guess you should. Why don't we buy some tomatoes for him on our way back?"

Mashiro and Rita both nodded.

At that moment, sunlight shone upon them. It peeked out between the gaps of the rainy clouds.

Sorata started to walk first. Looking over his shoulders, he saw Mashiro and Rita walking hand in hand behind him. The sight brought a smile to his face.

"Sorata's expression is creepy."

"You really don't hold anything back!"

“Sorata’s always like that.”

“Don’t make it worse!”

Mashiro and Rita laughed out loud. This was the first time seeing Rita laugh naturally. Sorata felt a smile surfacing, but he held it back with all his strength. If he was verbally abused again, it would ruin his good mood. He didn’t want to do something as stupid as that.

Part 3

To go back to Sakurasou, Sorata contacted Jin and caught Misaki's car that was luckily near by.

It only took them 3 minutes to get to Sakurasou. Rita went inside the bathroom first to warm up her body. But before she could even take her clothes off, Rita grabbed Mashiro's arm and pulled her inside. Mashiro was also drenched because she had been out in the rain without an umbrella before.

As she was closing the bathroom door behind her, Rita said

"Would you like to join us, Sorata?"

And Sorata answered,

"Should I?"

Like a friendly bar staff.

"Don't be silly!"

Nanami smacked him on the head with a towel.

"I'll allow you to peek."

And Rita closed the door completely after saying that.

"She says that she'll allow it."

Sorata tried asking Nanami for the permission.

"Permission denied."

Not that Sorata had the guts to actually peek inside in the first place…

Sorata dried his drenched head with a towel that Nanami handed to him. And he returned to his room to get changed. Even his boxers were drenched.

After drying his wet uniform and organising the laundry, he went upstairs to Mashiro's room. Of course, it was to fetch some dry clothes for the people in the bath to get changed into.

Sorata met Nanami again in front of the room.

"Thanks for the towel."

"Yeah."

Mashiro's room was very tidy. Obviously, it was Rita who cleaned it up. Sorata quickly got some clothes from the closet. He took some underwear as well. Mashiro's clothes and Rita's clothes were fairly easy to organise. However, the problem was the underwear. Choosing out the panties wasn't the problem. But what about the bras? Mashiro and Rita had very different figures.

"Hey."

"What is it?"

"Shiina's bra wouldn't fit her would it?"

Sorata asked a very personal question to Nanami.

"Probably."

"Then could you lend her some?"

"Ask Kamiigusa-senpai instead. My size won't fit her anyway!"

"Ah… uhh… sorry."

Sorata looked at Nanami's chest without meaning to.

"Where do you think you're apologising to!"

It was hard to tell if Nanami was blushing because she was embarrassed or because she was angry.

"Then could you ask her for me? I don't want to be killed by Jin-senpai."

"I was going to anyway!"

Sorata followed Nanami and left the room.

He finished his mission when he went downstairs and handed over the change of clothes to Nanami after she got some underwear from Misaki. Now, Sorata just killed some time in his room as he waited for the two to come out.

After Mashiro and Rita finished taking a bath, Sorata lead them to the dining area.

At the centre of the table, there was a large pot. It was sizzling away and emitted a nice flavoursome aroma.

“I didn’t know tonight’s dinner was a hotpot?”

“We’re having a welcome party so a hot pot is obvious. It’s Sakurasou’s tradition.”

Jin explained it to her.

“Then may I ask who we’re welcoming?”

“We’re obviously welcoming you, Ritan~!”

All of the sudden, Misaki pulled hard on a party popper. Hit with the streams of paper and fluttery bits, Rita opened her eyes wide in surprise.

“You mean, me?”

“They’ll welcome you whether you like it or not, so give up on resisting.”

Nanami smiled unexcitedly, as she remembered her own experience.

“No, I’m really happy. Thank you.”

Rita bowed her head deeply. Jin quickly led her to her seat and sat her down. And the person who prepared a hotpot even in this situation was none other than Jin. He was really something special.

After seating Rita down, Sorata and Jin barged into Ryuunosuke’s room and dragged him out and Chihiro joined them just in time after she came back from school. With the whole group in the same place, a fierce war broke out to take as much meat and vegetables as they could.

Although Rita was the main figure in this hotpot party, no one went easy on her. But that made the time spent together more memorable and enjoyable.

“Ah, senpai! I was just about to eat that!”

“Thou art naïve, Kohai-kun! There are no limits when it comes to eating hotpot! To eat or to be to eaten, that is the question!”

The monster by the name of Misaki ate up all of the remaining meat without a trace.

“What! That’s cheating!”

“Kamiigusa-senpai, please don’t be so rowdy when you’re eating… ah, that was my piece!”

“This is a world for the strong, Nanamin!”

“I won’t go easy on you if you’re going to be like this!”

Now, even Nanami was starting to show aggressive behaviours.

“And Shiina! Don’t leave mushrooms on my plate!”

“It’s a present.”

“If you’re not going to eat it, then don’t pick it out in the first place!”

Before Sorata could stop talking, Mashiro quickly moved some more mushrooms onto his plate.

“Kanda, there is no more beer left.”

“You’re the only one who drinks them, so get them yourself!”

With an ‘it can’t be helped’ expression, Jin passed a can of beer for Chihiro.

“I understand. So a hotpot means war.”

They ended up teaching Rita the wrong thing about Japanese culture. On the other hand, Ryuunosuke was quietly munching on some cabbages, which had a lower level of competition.

Seeing Ryuunosuke like that, Sorata gave him a meatball that he was barely able to secure.

“Don’t only eat vegetables and eat some meat.”

Quietly thinking for a while, Ryuunosuke popped the meatball in his mouth. As he was chewing on it in silence, he reached out for the pot, grabbed some mushrooms and placed it Sorata’s plate to show his thanks.

“No need to thank me.”

“All I’m eating are mushrooms!”

After eating all the udon as well, he was absolutely stuffed. Everyone else appeared to be in bliss as well.

As she was drinking some tea prepared by Jin, Rita suddenly stood up and sat next to Ryuunosuke who was sitting across her.

“Umm…”

“Don’t come any closer. I’m already getting the chills.”

“So you really do hate women.”

With a mischievous smile, Rita reached out to playfully nudge Ryuunosuke. Sensing the immediate danger, Ryuunosuke instinctively stood up and hid behind Sorata as he gave out the orders.

“Kanda, make sure that that women doesn’t come anywhere closer.”

“Akasaka, you can’t use me like this.”

“What would happen if you actually came into contact with a woman that you seem to hate so much?”

“Cut the small talk and state your terms.”

This time, Rita looked at Sorata.

“So, what happens?”

Sorata already knew that Ryuunosuke feels faint whenever he was near a girl and that he broke out in hives if he actually touched one, but he couldn't sell out his own friend.

"How wonderful, men's friendship at its finest. If you choose to silent, then I guess I shouldn't intervene."

"Whatever. Just state what you want, freeloader."

Rita looked straight at Ryuunosuke over Sorata's shoulders. Sorata felt like he was being stared at instead and got slightly nervous.

"I'm sorry about before. I said too much."

"It is one of human's virtues to recognise your own faults."

Ryuunosuke was still talking big, even when he was hiding behind Sorata.

"How strange. I feel like I should that that apology back."

"Was that all you wanted to say?"

"No, that was just the start."

"Then hurry it up. I want to take a bath."

"Then would you like to hear it while I'm washing your back?"

"Ah, wash mine as well!"

Jin started to disturb the conversation.

"Mitaka-senpai, please read the mood."

Nanami gave Jin the daggers.

"Sorry Aoyama. I'll ask you tomorrow, so don't get too jealous."

"I'm not jealous!"

"Then Nanami and I will wash each other all over the place!

“I-I fear that something that’s important to be will be stolen, so I refuse!”

Those two were enjoying their everyday life conversation in their own way.

“So, what do you want?”

“Please let me participate for the culture festival.”

Everyone’s attention was focused on Rita when she said that.

Seated next to her, Mashiro let out a sigh of relief. She seemed to be glad.

Meanwhile, Chihiro gulped down the beer indifferently.

“Your request has been noted. Ask Kanda for further instructions.”

“I’ll do so straight away.”

“I’ll also lend you my laptop later on. You need to redraw anything that doesn’t meet the standard.”

“Who are you speaking to? I’m very confident with my skills you know?”

“Stop your boastings. I only care about the result.”

“Then you can treat me nicer when I produce some satisfactory results.”

Rita wore a sneaky smile.

Was it just Sorata who was sensing a dispute between Rita and Ryuunosuke? No, it definitely wasn’t just him.

“After a storm come a calm huh?”

Jin summarised the situation appropriately while sipping on his cup of tea.

“This isn’t too bad…”

Nanami seemed to have given up.

“Now our party is finally complete! There is no one who can stop us now! Wait for us, culture fest!”

Misaki yelled out as usual

“Rita, I’m glad that you feel better.”

Mashiro smiled out of relief. It was the first time seeing her smile like that.

Suddenly, the dormitory’s phone rang.

“Kanda, phone.”

Chihiro ordered him as she opened yet another can of beer.

“Why me?!”

Why did Chihiro always order him around when there were others around as well?

“Hello, this is the Suimei High dorm Sakurasou.”

「This is Shiina.」

It was a voice that Sorata has never heard before and the speaker had a deep, calm voice.

Sorata could hear the bunch being merry in the kitchen. He could also hear Misaki yelling as well. It sounded like Nanami failed at trying to eat something. But those voices sounded very distant to Sorata.

What did he just say? Shiina… Shiina…

「Could you pass the phone to Sengoku?」

With a shaking hand, Sorata pressed the on-hold button. And he yelled towards the kitchen.

“A call for you, sensei!”

Her face bright red due to the alcohol, Chihiro walked towards him.

She was asking who it was with her eyes, but Sorata couldn’t answer. But that itself would’ve been enough for an answer. Chihiro glanced over towards the kitchen. Perhaps she was trying to see Mashiro from there.

She picked up the phone. And she pressed the on-hold button.

“Yes, this is Chihiro. Ah, uncle, long time no speak. Oh, you’re in Narita right now? Yes, I’m doing well. Well, not too much… yes…”

Sorata knew that it was bad to overhear a conversation. He knew it, but he couldn’t move away from that spot. Mashiro must’ve thought that it was strange for Sorata not to return from the kitchen and poked her head around.

Chihiro finally let go of the phone.

With a whew sound, she let out a long sigh.

Rising up her head, Chihiro looked towards Mashiro and Rita to say this.

“He’s coming to pick you up tomorrow.”

Sorata could hear a door closing inside his head. It was the time to say farewell….

Chapter 4 - How Many Miles Is It To Where You Are?

Part 1

It was past midnight when Sorata headed towards the bath room.

— He's coming to pick you up tomorrow

He washed his face while sitting down in the bathtub. Over and over again… not that it would wash away the past. Not that it changed the reality to a dream.

He aimlessly looked up at the ceiling. Droplets of water fell on his forehead. He liked the feel of the cool droplets. It was eye opening.

While he remained like that for a while, he heard the door to the bathroom opening. Since there was the sign「Males inside」, it was most likely to be Jin.

"Sorata."

However, the voice that he heard belonged to a girl. For a moment, he mistook the voice for Mashiro's but it wasn't. It was Rita

"W-What is it?"

"Could you spare me some time?"

"If you don't mind me being in my birthday suit."

"Can I open the door?"

"Let's not do that."

"Then please listen to me."

Rita sounded rather down. Sorata could tell that she having some troubles.

"Alright."

Rita sat in front of the half transparent door. She had her back towards him.

"A long time ago, there was a girl who was very talented at painting."

Without moving, Sorata started to listen.

“The girls’ paintings were so great that it impacted and moved those who saw them.”

It was very obvious who that girl was.

“So many people surrounded the girl to see her paintings and the people wouldn’t stop.”

She was talking about Mashiro.

“Someone called her a genius. Another person said that she had great talents. Some said that the girl was blessed by the gods of art. Where ever she went, people praised her.”

Sorata closed his eyes and tried to imagine the girl in that story.

“But that girl wasn’t happy at all.”

He could picture the blank faced Mashiro.

“No compliments touched her heart at all.”

Then what will move Mashiro?

“One day, at the request of her friend, she went to the art gallery to see her own painting. That day, there were a lot of people at the gallery as usual as they all came to see the painting. The girl stood away from her painting and watched the people from a distance. She was just being whimsical.”

Where was this story going?

“Then she noticed a young boy there. That boy wasn’t interested in her paintings at all. He said ‘this painting’s weird!’ and started to read a book at the corner of the gallery. And he read that book intensely…. He was sometimes serious, but he was sometimes laughing as well. Wondering what he was reading, the girl asked the boy「What are you reading?」. Then the boy brightly smiled and showed her the book while saying「Here」.”

“I see…”

“That book was a manga that was drawn on a far away island country. And shortly after, the girl left for that country…. End of story.”

When Sorata asked Mashiro why she chose to draw manga, she replied that painting was boring. Sorata realised that Mashiro was telling the truth.

It was too much for a kid to understand the artistic world- something that not even Sorata was able to understand.

“I don’t know the true reason behind it. But I think that played a big role on her decision making.”

“… And why are you telling me this?”

“I’m not too sure either. I just wanted to say it.”

“I see, thank you.”

“Then should I wash you back?”

“What?”

“I’m only kidding.”

Rita stood up and her outline quickly disappeared. Sorata watched the door in silence. He then looked at the surface of the bath water. A pathetic face stared back at him.

Even after returning to his room after the bath, he couldn’t fall asleep. Usually, Sorata played with the cats until he fell asleep, but there weren’t any in the room. They must’ve gone off to play in other people’s rooms. Recently, they’ve been going to Nanami and Misaki’s rooms often.

Sorata looked up at the light which was still glowing after he turned it off. Thinking ‘why is it still glowing?’.

If he didn’t take his mind off things, he would remind himself again about what Chihiro said.

— He’s coming to pick you up tomorrow

That voice kept resounding in Sorata's head.

"Ah~ damn it."

He wrapped his hands around his head.

He didn't understand why he was angry. He knew that the day was coming. He knew it, but he wasn't ready for it.

What will happen to Mashiro. What should I do? There isn't anything I can do at this stage when I wasn't able to do anything before. Then should I give up? Giving up… what am I giving up on? Sorata's head was is a mess.

As his brain was turning into a mess, he heard a faint sound of his phone vibrating. It was a text.

— Sorata, are you asleep?

It was from Mashiro.

Fingers shaking, Sorata typed out his response.

— No.

A reply didn't come straight away. It must've been because she was still not used to texting.

— I see.

The reply that he's been waiting for, for the last 2 minutes, was short. He typed out a response straight away.

— Yeah.

Did he need to wait for a while again? He probably did. But it actually worked out for Sorata. He didn't want to rush things.

— I'm not asleep either.

As expected, the reply came after 2 minutes.

— If you're texting when you're sleeping, then that's something out of a horror story!

The only ones who were able to send texts when sleeping were Ryuunosuke and Maid-chan.

— Hey Sorata

— What

It took nearly 3 minutes until the next text came. It arrived when he wasn't expecting it.

With skilful fingers, he opened the text. As soon as he read the text, all of his emotions that he was keeping in check busted out.

— I want to see you.

That was what Mashiro's text was.

All of his emotions exploded inside him. He wanted to see Mashiro's face. Hear her voice. If she allowed it, he wanted to hug her tight.

He jumped up from his bed. His common sense told him that it was dangerous to see Mashiro's face right now. But his mind started to take over.

He opened the door to leave the room.

"Ah."

Sorata froze on the spot as soon as he opened the door. He could only stand there and blink silently.

All of his attention was focused at a single spot.

It was because Mashiro was there, leaning against the wall opposite the door while hugging a pillow.

In the dim hallway, Mashiro's phone light shone on Mashiro. Her slender figure resembled a nervous lost child.

"You…"

Mashiro finally raised her head.

"Today…"

“Huh?”

“I want to be together until I fall asleep.”

Sorata fell silent instantly.

Mashiro stood up from the spot and approached him. She rested her head on Sorata’s shoulder while bowing her head and hugging a pillow to her chest.

At her unexpected action, Sorata stepped back by instinct and let his reasoning recover. It was dangerous right now. If he even touched Mashiro’s finger, then he wouldn’t ever let go of that hand.

He would run away while holding on to her.

But he couldn’t trouble anyone else because of how he feels. Rita thought him that. That sometimes, we can inflict pain unintentionally to our dear ones.

So if he was to run away with Mashiro, he needed the resolve to do so single handily. He had to ask himself if he was going to do things half handedly. If he really wasn’t going to let go of Mashiro’s hand…

But he couldn’t. He caught a glimpse of how big the world really is, and he knew that he was a tiny existence.

“Please don’t say no.”

Mashiro looked up at him with serious eyes.

He wasn’t able to mumble it over, nor was he able to laugh over it. To relieve himself from the nervousness, Sorata looked away from Mashiro while scratching his head.

“It’s only for today. If Aoyama finds out, we’ll be in trouble.”

“I’ll be in trouble with you as well.”

“I know you’re just going to run away.”

He walked into the room while saying that and gave up his bed for Mashiro as he moved his pillow away.

“What about Sorata?”

“I’ll sleep on the floor.”

“… OK.”

Mashiro quietly placed her pillow on the bed.

The night was ever so quiet.

Lying down on the floor, Sorata quietly looked up at the ceiling instead of closing his eyes.

He couldn’t see Mashiro. However, it felt like their thoughts were connected to each other. He knew that was why she spoke to him first.

“Sorata.”

“What is it?”

“Did I hurt Sorata as well?”

He wasn’t surprised. A lot of things happened today after all. But it wasn’t like he could give an encouraging word.

“… I.”

The sound that escaped from his mouth was nothing more than a mumble, but that was his reply.

“Don’t lie.”

As he was about to force himself to continue, he heard that.

“Because I can’t tell the difference.”

“I got it.”

“Should I return to England?”

He just promised her not to tell a lie.

“I… if it was me, I would’ve done so.”

A short silence. After the uncomfortable silence, Mashiro asked.

“Why?”

“Rita said it before, right? That if it was Shiina, you should be able to paint something that will leave a mark in history.”

“Yeah.”

“I saw your painting at the gallery. I’m not too sure because I don’t know much about art, but I could feel something different from your painting. It was the first time feeling like that.”

He wasn’t able to express it in words. But he could feel it in his body. Every cell of his body reacted to that painting. That was how impacting it was. Mashiro’s painting that is.

“… I see.”

“If I had that much talent, then I would’ve chosen that path. Isn’t that only natural? Your work will be there hundreds of years from now. I think that’s amazing. Don’t you think so as well? I’m sure everyone feels the same way.”

“I’m not too sure.”

“I see.”

This was why everyone praised Mashiro to be a genius. This was why normal people looked up to Mashiro. This was why Mashiro was in pain- at the huge difference between her and normal people.

“I don’t know about what will happen in hundreds of years from now on.”

“Well, that’s true.”

“It’s hard to be normal.”

“Shiina…”

“Everyone says it- that I’m not normal…”

“…”

“It really is hard to be normal.”

“That’s not…”

Sorata’s voice cracked.

“I want to be normal.”

“Don’t say that.”

“If I was, then I would’ve been able to understand Rita… and Sorata as well…”

“… Stop it!”

“Sorata?”

“I think that I am the way that I am today thanks to you Shiina. If it wasn’t for you, I would’ve left Sakurasou. So please don’t say that.”

“…”

“You should sleep now.”

“… Yeah.”

He rolled around. Sorata obviously didn’t feel sleepy. But he stilled tried to- while hearing Mashiro’s rustling sounds.

— What will you do tomorrow?

And he regretted not being able to say that to her…

Part 2

When Sorata opened his eyes the next day, Mashiro was no longer on his bed. He checked under the desk as well, but Mashiro was nowhere to be seen.

She must've returned to her own room while Sorata was asleep, because when Sorata checked Room202, he found Mashiro fast asleep under her computer desk- on which she drew her mangas.

Wondering if it was just a dream, Sorata woke Mashiro up as usual, combed her hair, got her some change of clothes, ate some breakfast and went to school together while Rita, hugging the calico cat Kodama, saw them off.

Misaki must've went to school fairly early, because she was nowhere to be seen when Sorata got up. Nanami left early as well, saying that she had some committee duties and it seemed like Jin and Chihiro left at around the same time as well. Ryuunosuke's presence disappeared as well.

Sorata was slightly happy at the fact that Sakurasou was no different than any other days.

Silently, he and Mashiro walked along the road like they've always done. Going down the slope that was connected to Sakurasou, they walked past the playground and took the right path on the fork road near the shopping district and finally arrived at school.

Just like any other days, rows of students were sucked into the stairways. Some students who were doing some morning training with their clubs were dressed in their trainers.

It was a really ordinary sight. It was something that wouldn't change for a long time.

Sorata changed into his indoor shoes just like every other students. The worn out shoes were dirty and the hill parts were scrunched up.

"Shiina, hurry up."

Watching Mashiro as she stood under the shadows of the shoe lockers, he saw her bend down to pick up her shoes. Noticing Sorata's gaze, she slowly looked up. And

before Sorata could point anything out, she pulled down on her skirt.

Half surprised, Sorata looked away.

“I’m going to finish late today.”

He quickly mumbled it out.

“I need to give that presentation.”

He had to give a presentation for the「Galactic Cat Nyaboron」that they were going to do for the culture festival.

After changing into the indoor shoes, Mashiro got up to the stairways and stopped in front of Sorata.

“I’ll wait.”

“S-Sure. So you’ll be in your class room?”

“Yes.”

“Then see you later.”

“Nyaboron, fight on!”

“Leave it to me.”

Sorata and Mashiro separated and headed to their respective classrooms. It was because the normal student classes’ and arts student classes’ were on the opposite directions.

But Sorata looked back quickly. Mashiro was walking away from him. He silently watched her go until she was no longer visible. Mashiro didn’t notice Sorata’s gaze.

This was also something that happened all the time. It was the same as usual. It wasn’t any different than yesterday. So maybe that’s why he felt like he was starting to forget about it. How Mashiro’s father was coming to Sakurasou today. About the phone call yesterday. And about what he said to Mashiro last night about how he wanted to be with her…. It felt like everything was just a dream. Was it because he wished that it was just a dream?

He could see Mashiro's texts when he opened his phone…. The reality was coldly carved into his phone…

"Am I really satisfied with this?"

Not knowing how to relieve himself from that stress, Sorata turned around and headed towards his classroom by himself.

Part 3

After school, Sorata stood inside the student council room.

Inside, there were 7 students sitting down in a ⊂ shaped formation as they looked at Sorata intensely.

There were 3 people who were sitting at the front and they were the president and the two vice presidents of the culture festival committee. On their left and right side, there were Suimei High student council president and the Suimei University student council president.

This was definitely a serious crowd. But for some reason, he wasn't afraid. It would be a lie if he said that he wasn't nervous, but this was nothing compared to the presentation he had to give at the game company.

It was actually the listeners who appeared to be tense.

Booting up the laptop that Ryuunosuke lent him, Sorata connected it to the projector and displayed the presentation on the screen.

"Kanda, are you ready?"

The one who asked that question was no other than Nanami, the only Sakurasou member who came to support him. Nanami was one of the reasons why Sorata didn't feel so afraid.

Going over the equipment set up, Sorata gave Nanami the sign.

"May he start now?"

Nanami asked everyone.

"Please start."

The pale skinned student council president fiddled with his black rimmed glasses. Hearing the response, Nanami stepped back towards the wall. As she did, she sent the OK sign to Sorata. It was now Sorata's turn to play his role.

“Then I’ll start my presentation on Sakurasou’s project for the culture festival-「Galactic Cat Nyaboron」.”

Sorata clicked with the mouse that was connected to the laptop via a USB cable to go to the next slide.

That was when the door slammed open.

“Sorata! Follow me!”

The intruder was Jin and his usual calm self was nowhere to be seen. He was sweating from his forehead and his breathing was irregular. His eyes appeared to be anxious.

“What do you think you’re doing, Mitaka!”

The student council president yelled at him.

“Jin-senpai what is it? I’m.…”

“Her father came to pick her up!”

He could feel his heart dropping.

“So Mashiro is!”

The student council president stood up while slamming down on the table.

“Are you saying that Sakurasou doesn’t have to participate in the culture festival?”

Jin’s words and the student council president’s words overlapped each other. Sorata couldn’t hear the important parts.

“If you do not take this seriously, then we cannot permit you to participate.”

At the student council president’s attitude, Sorata reached his limits.

“Shut up! Keep your mouth shut!”

Sorata shouted almost subconsciously.

The student council president as taken back by that. His gaze on Sorata sharpened. The

atmosphere was waning and everyone there were completely shocked.

Noticing what he just done, Sorata's anger quickly diminished.

"No, uhh… please be quiet."

Nobody said a word. No one tried to get up and stick up for Sorata. Even the student council president, who was already standing up, sat back down. He quietly said "This is why Sakurasou is…" as he sat down, but it didn't reach Sorata's ears. No, it did, but he just didn't bother about it.

Sorata looked at Jin again.

"He came sometime during our 5th lesson to pick her up with Rita and they went to the airport."

In his head, he could sense something that didn't make sense.

"I heard it from Chihiro. It's pretty certain."

As if he was reading his mind, Jin told him and Sorata's vision faltered. Things that he should be able to see started to become blurry. The room started to fade away. His view became narrower.

"No way…. You're lying…"

He squeezed out his voice from within his throat.

But it did make sense, since he has been told that Mashiro's father will come to Sakurasou to pick Mashiro and Rita up. He was just being hopeful that nothing would happen since nothing happened that morning.

"It's a lie!"

Not being able to hold back the building anguish inside him, Sorata started to run. He pushed Jin out of the way and ran out from the student council room.

"Ah, Kanda!"

"Sorata!"

Nanami and Jin's voice didn't reach Sorata. He ran through the corridor as fast as possible. He was screaming "It's a lie!" without meaning to. He was howling it out. just like a wild beast.

While he was running, he ran directly into a PE teacher and fell backwards noisily. His uniform near his knees burned away due to the friction, and his palms that lessened the impact of the fall, felt hot. But before he could even recognise the pain, Sorata stood up and started to run again.

"Stop right there, Kanda!"

His PE teacher's shout was already far behind him.

Sorata ran up the stairs. He bumped into some students who were in their trainers as they were heading to their club activities. They shouted if Sorata wanted to be killed. Sorata nearly made a female student fall over as she was preparing for the culture festival. The girl told Sorata to be careful. After repeating the situation a few times, Sorata finally got to the art class room.

He slammed the door open and ran inside.

"I told you to wait for me!"

He was screaming from the bottom of his heart.

His raging feelings wouldn't calm down. Bitting down on his lips, Sorata started to run again. Even though he knew that Mashiro was no longer at school, he started to chase her again.

He escaped from the long corridor. His untrained muscles were screaming in pain. But he accelerated at the staircase. He went to the art classrooms in the other building and opened the door.

His uneven breaths sounded unpleasant.

He could feel someone inside the class when he wasn't really expecting anyone.

"Shiina!"

The one who turned around at Sorata's excited voice was Chihiro.

“Mashiro’s not here.”

“Why didn’t you stop her!”

“I don’t really need to get involved in Mashiro’s decisions.”

Chihiro was being blunt as usual.

Sorata was angry at his own uselessness of not being able to do anything even after hearing that.

“But it’s too sudden!”

“Apparently she won a prize a big competition with a painting that she drew before. Since the award ceremony is tomorrow, it can’t be helped. Plus, it’s a great opportunity as well.”

“Why didn’t you stop her?”

He asked the same question coldly.

Chihiro didn’t answer. She looked at him while saying ‘didn’t I tell you already’ with her eyes.

It was something that Mashiro decided. It wasn’t something that we need to interfere.

She was right. It was just like what Chihiro said.

And why did he forget about what he said last night with his own mouth?

He said that he would go back if it was him. He certainly said that he would return to the artistic world if he was as talented as Mashiro.

Mashiro had the talents to move even Sorata who didn’t know anything about arts with a single painting. If he was that impacted by a single painting…. So Sorata was certain. He understood it. He discovered it. That is, where Mashiro should be at.

Someone who is as amazing as her shouldn’t be buried.

So Mashiro was going to do what Sorata, Rita and the people who knew about Mashiro’s works wanted her to do- returning to the artistic world in order to use her

talents to the fullest.

Then he should be glad about Mashiro's decision. He should be cheering her on from now on.

But he wasn't glad at all. He wasn't happy. How could he be glad?

It was painful and he found it difficult to breathe.

Not having the strength to keep himself up, Sorata kneeled on the floor. He thought he should be able to relax, but the phone inside his pocket bothered him. To get rid of the unpleasantness, he took out his phone. With his fingers shaking, he found Mashiro's number.

When the first dial tone rang, he started to get nervous. She was somewhere that was reachable.

When the second dial tone rang, he held his breath. What was he going to say when she picks up?

As the third dial tone rang, the call connected. Sorata's heart was painfully beating.

As he was about to hang up, he heard a voice.

"Kohai-kun?"

It was Misaki's voice.

"What."

Sorata muttered in a tired way.

"Mashiron left her phone in the room~! So…"

All of his strength in the arm that was holding the phone left him. Misaki continued to talk, but Sorata wasn't able to answer to anything in his current mental state. All of his hope that he had disappeared with that phone call.

At that moment, Jin and Nanami caught up to him.

"Sorata, we're going after her."

“What do you mean….”

“The airport. We’re going to Narita.”

“How…”

“I told Misaki to bring the car. She should be here soon.”

Thinking ‘ah, so that was why Misaki answered Mashiro’s phone’, Sorata silently accepted the situation.

But that was it. Sorata wasn’t able to move. His body wouldn’t let him move.

“I… can’t go.”

“Kanda, don’t joke around.”

“The presentation… I need to go back. If I sincerely apologise, we might be alright.”

He forced himself up. As he tried to leave the art room with his head bowed, Nanami grabbed his shoulders. Her fingers and her fingernails dug into his skin painfully.

“Are you serious?”

Nanami’s eyes appeared to be stern.

“Of course I am. It’s a chance that you made for us.”

“That’s not important!”

“Then what is?”

“What about Mashiro?! What will you do about Mashiro?”

“What do you mean, what will I do? It’s Shiina’s decision and it’s not something that I should interfere with. It’s obvious for her to live in the artistic world.”

He tried to shake Nanami’s hands off, but he couldn’t. Nanami held on tightly onto his shoulders.

“Do you even realise it? She’s going back to England!”

“I know.”

“What d’ya mean, you know! Are ya sayin’ that ya’ll be alright even if ya can’t see Mashiro from now on?”[24]

Unpleasant creaking noises resounded deep inside his heart. He started to waver.

“It’s not about what is and what isn’t for Mashiro! What d’ya want to do right now!”

Nanami grabbed his collar tightly. At her menacing look, Sorata started to rage.

“Do you really think that I don’t want to chase after her!”

He broke free from Nanami’s grasp. Nanami jerked back in surprise.

“But Shiina already decided to go back to England!”

When he started to talk, he couldn’t stop.

“She said that she wanted to be a mangaka, but look at what’s happened!”

He couldn’t keep his feelings in check.

“When she tried so hard for it!”

Words continuously flowed out from his mouth.

“Even though her manga got serialised!”

His anger, frustration, rage and sadness got mixed up as they poured out.

“What the hell is this! Without saying anything to us! Don’t be stupid!”

He was being honest.

“There should be a limit to her lack of common sense! How can she do this when we’ve been together for half a year? How can she leave all of those behind so easily. Her mangas, and us as well!”

Thinking that they were only worth that much to her, it made it harder for Sorata to hold back. There was no way that he could accept it.

“What the hell! What the hell is she thinking, making us worry like this!”

“If you have that many things to say to her, then go and chase her.”

Chihiro held back her yawns.

“She’s right, Kanda.”

When he looked up, he saw Nanami and Jin.

“We lived together for nearly half a year, so isn’t it obvious that we should see her off?”

Jin controlled the mood perfectly and smiled gently.

“If we, as the members of Sakurasou, don’t see her off, then who will?”

Then he heard the sound of a klaxon.

He looked outside.

Misaki was driving her van wildly across the school yard and stopped it in front of the school building.

“Kohai-kun! Hurry up!”

Misaki poked her head out of the window.

“Let’s go.”

Saying that, Jin started to run. Sorata and Nanami followed.

They ran down the stairs. Sorata caught up to Jin on the 2nd floor, and surpassed him on the 1st floor. He jumped over a window and went outside.

“Kanda! What about your shoes?”

“Just go!”

Changing his shoes would be a waste of time.

He went around to the back of the field. Hesitant before, Jin and Nanami also ran

behind him in their indoor shoes. As soon as they turned a corner, they could see Misaki's car.

They made eye contact with Misaki who was in the driver's seat. She steered the car to the opposite direction for them.

"Damn it, Kamiigusa! It's you again!"

A well built teacher approached the car.

Ignoring the teacher, Sorata opened the door and hopped on to the back seat. Jin in the front seat and Nanami got on to the back, next to Sorata. As soon as the door was shut, Misaki stepped hard onto the accelerator.

A dust cloud rose up behind the wheels.

"Whoa! You better brace yourself for when you get back!"

The voice of the coughing teacher quickly disappeared behind them.

Looking around, Sorata spotted a large sack that only Santa Clause would carry in the back seat and next to it, Ryuunosuke. Thinking that it was unusual for him to be there, Sorata kept silent on purpose and Ryuunosuke kindly explained himself.

"I was kidnapped by Kamiigusa-senpai on my way home."

With cheers from the students around them, the van drove out from the school gates and entered the roads.

Next to him, Nanami was gasping for breath while flexing her shoulders. Sorata was doing the same as well.

"Aoyama."

"Yeah?"

"I'm all OK now."

"Yep."

"Thank you so much."

“You can tell me that when we get there in time.”

If he didn’t say it now, he didn’t think he’ll get the chance to say it ever again. However, Sorata kept that to himself. He had to believe in himself- hoping that it wouldn’t be too late.

“Jin-senpai, Misaki-senpai, thank you as well.”

“We were going to see her off even if you didn’t want to come with us, Sorata.”

“I’m not going to give up on Mashiron that easily~! And if Ritan thinks that she can sneak away easily, then she’s gravely mistaken!”

It was just like them. Hearing that made Sorata feel slightly better. He wanted to laugh at himself for thinking over it too much.

“When we get to Narita, and then take the 1st terminal, 4th floor.”

The one who said that was Ryuunosuke. He was searching for something on the laptop.

“There should be the international flights lobby.”

“Got it. So, the 1st terminal, 4th floor?”

“If they go through the security checks, then it’ll be all over. You can only go beyond that point if you have a boarding ticket.”

“I’ll find her before then.”

The car drove past the highway tollgate. They quickly accelerated.

By now, everyone in the car had regained their breaths. Then, only the edgy feelings filled up the car. Sorata continued to plead silently in his heart, wishing that they would hurry up. Feeling that way, he naturally opened his mouth.

“I’ll say it clearly.”

He wasn’t actually addressing anyone.

“I’ll tell Shiina to do her best.”

“Yeah.”

Nanami agreed with him.

“I want to tell her for sure.”

“You can do it.”

Jin continued to look forwards.

“To do her best and draw something amazing.”

“Yeah.”

“So that she can leave her name down in the history.”

“If it’s Mashiro, she can do it.”

“When that happens, I’m going to be bragging everywhere I go about her.”

Sorata slightly laughed as he said that. Nanami, Jin and Misaki laughed with him. Even Ryuunosuke snickered.

If this was what Mashiro decided, then they should support her till the end. She had the talent to mesmerise and move people, so she should be happier to be at a place where she can utilise her skills to the fullest. Because across the world, there are people who wants to be moved by Mashiro’s paintings. Even throughout the ages…

Sceneries flashed past them at a great speed. They over took cars after cars. If they were on the highway, then that meant that the other cars were going at around 100km/h…

“Hey Misaki-senpai, we’re speeding too much!”

The metre box was pointing to 150km/h. A warning alarm started to go off inside the car.

“Hold on tightly to your worries, Kohai-kun!”

“How can I do that!”

“Because we can do 180km/h even at the slightest press on the accelerator.”

“Don’t push it! I don’t want to die nor do I want to be arrested by the police, so slow down!”

“How can you call yourself a man, Kohai-kun!”

Misaki yelled as she held tightly onto the steering wheel.

“What are you saying now?!”

“If you’re a man, then there are times when you have to do something, knowing that you’re going to die!”

“What? Am I going to die?!”

They continued to overtake cars that should’ve been driving at 100km/h one after another. The sound of the rushing wind was unbelievable. The car itself was wobbling quite a bit. He was genuinely afraid.

“Mitaka-senpai! Please stop Kamiigusa-senpai!”

Nanami quickly asked for help.

“It’s impossible. Just start praying.”

“We’re resorting to that?”

Afterwards, the car continued to accelerate and managed to hit 200km/h as they drove along that highway.

They continued to drive quite fast even after leaving the highway, but they weren’t caught up in an accident nor were they caught by the police and they safely arrived at the Narita Airport.

They needed some time to unwind from that experience, but they didn’t have that kind of leisure.

As soon as the car came to a halt in front of the doors, Sorata, Nanami and Jin started to run.

“I want to go as well~!”

“Misaki, you go and park the car!”

Jin stopped Misaki as she tried to follow them.

“But!”

“We’ll find her for sure!”

Sorata shouted that as he entered the airport and he looked around.

He had to go to the 1st terminal, 4th floor.

He could choose between the elevator or the escalator. No. Deciding that the stairs would be faster, Sorata weaved in and out of the crowd of boarders with large suitcases.

Racing up the stairs with all his strength, he could feel his lungs about to rip. His calves and thighs were in a worse state. Loosing strength, his legs started to tense up. But he didn’t stop- he couldn’t stop.

He had things to say when he meets Mashiro. He had something that he had to say no matter what. It would be alright even if his lungs collapsed as long as he’s able to say what he wanted to.

Breathing coarsely, he stepped off the last step and arrived on the 4th floor. It was the international flights lobby.

Sorata stopped moving again.

It was big. There were a lot of people. Foreigners were the majority on that floor, but that didn’t mean Japanese people were very noticeable. He wouldn’t be able to find her by using normal methods.

The thought of him missing her at this rate filled up his head and he could fill a chill down his back.

As if pouring oil on the fire, the boarding call for the flight set to London Heathrow Airport rang out via the speakers.

He started to sweat from the pressure. Breathing became difficult. It might be too late now.

If Mashiro was to catch the flight, then she would have to pass through the security gates.

“Let’s split up. Sorata go to the Northern Wing, I’ll take the South. Aoyama, you stay here and make sure that we don’t miss anyone.”

Jin’s breathing was noticeably heavier as well. He was resting his hands on his knees, but he was searching- looking right and left.

“Don’t worry. We can find her in time. After all, I was able to spot Misaki at once at the Shibuya’s Scramble Crossings[25].”

Jin smiled bitterly as he said that.

“Now go!”

“Yes!”

Answering, Sorata started to run towards the Northern Wing. Pain overwhelmed him as he quickly ran out of breath, but he couldn’t care about that now.

He avoided the going and leaving passengers and continued to look for Mashiro. He couldn’t spot her. There were similar looking people, but they weren’t her. She wasn’t anywhere.

The furthest part of the Northern Wing was just a few meters away from him.

As expected, she wasn’t there.

She could be at the Southern Wing.

But his phone wasn’t ringing. That meant that neither Jin nor Nanami found Mashiro yet. Then did that mean that it was too late? Maybe she already passed through the boarding gates…. She could already be in the airplane that announced its boarding just now.

He was lost at what to do.

No, I can’t give up. Giving up is something that I can’t do.

As he was thinking that, a figure suddenly jumped into Sorata’s view. A detailed and

slim figure. A sharp S-line. Soft hair. Suimei High uniform. To Sorata, that person stood out quite clearly amongst the crowd. As if there was a spotlight falling onto her.

“Shiina!”

When he yelled out loudly, Mashiro turned around. She looked surprised.

He already seen her in the morning, but he was happy to see her again.

There were so many things that he wanted to say to her.

That it was too much to go back to England without saying anything to them. Asking what she was going to do with her manga serialisation. Telling her that a lot of people at school will be surprised if she disappears without saying anything. He wanted to tell her to take better care of herself. Not to be seen as easy in front of other males. And to fix her picky diet…. Why she didn’t bring her phone at an important time like this. And that he’ll send a lot of baumkuchen and send it to England.

Most of it was just nagging.

But he was really grateful to Mashiro. From the bottom of his heart….

He was able to change thanks to Mashiro. Watching Mashiro do her best drawing her manga motivated Sorata to do his best as well. At the start, he found it to be frustrating and unfulfilling, but it’s really thanks to Mashiro that he attempted the game proposal competition and started to learn programming.

So he wanted to tell her.

— Do your best.

And,

— I’ll cheer on for you.

In his own words, with his own voice while looking into Mashiro’s eyes and with an honest heart…

He wanted his farewell greeting to be like that.

“Sorata.”

Attracted by the familiar voice, Sorata approached Mashiro. Her face was just before his. But Sorata's feet wouldn't move.

The two's shadows overlapped each other.

"?!"

Mashiro gasped out in surprise. It was understandable. It was because Sorata stepped up and hugged Mashiro.

"… Don't go."

He was whispering that while holding Mashiro in his arms.

"Don't go."

He was saying it without knowing why.

"Don't go."

Sorata didn't come here to say that.

"I said don't go."

"Sorata, you keep repeating yourself."

He couldn't move his body the way he wanted it to move. Both of his hands didn't want to let go of Mashiro.

There were so many things that he wanted to say to her, but his head was completely empty.

"Don't go anywhere."

His throat tightened up. His nose got blocked. Whatever he said wouldn't reach Mashiro. But he couldn't recover his body back from his emotions..

"Don't go anywhere."

He wanted to cheer her on. He thought he was going to cheer her on. He thought he was going to be honest with himself, but his body and his mind were doing different things.

“Don’t go…”

“…”

Mashiro was silently listening.

“Please stay at Sakurasou.”

“… OK.”

Mashiro answered softly.

“…”

“I won’t go anywhere.”

He thought there was something wrong here.

“…”

“I won’t go.”

But he wasn't mistaken.

"Shiina?"

He slowly let go of her.

He looked into Mashiro's face.

"Are you being serious?"

It was like he was dreaming. He never imagined Mashiro to change her mind.

"I am."

Not being able to suppress down his boiling urges, Sorata hugged Mashiro again.

"… Sorata, too tight."

He wasn't able to express his feelings in words. If he spoke, he thought he was going to cry.

"Too tight."

"Sorry. My body won't listen to me."

Loosing strength, Mashiro leaned her head on Sorata's shoulder.

Then a round of applause rang out. Looking around in surprise, he heard a white man clapping with a smile on his face. But he wasn't the only one. Everyone around that lobby stood up and were clapping as if they were blessing Sorata and Mashiro. Adults, children, males, females and people of all nations were clapping for them.

They were attracting a lot of attention. But he didn't notice it at all. He only had Mashiro in his sights.

Embarrassed, Sorata let go of Mashiro.

A young, foreign couple was smiling at each other. White haired elderly couple were looking at Sorata and Mashiro in a warm way like they were looking at their grandchildren. A businessman was on the phone with someone- telling the other person about Sorata and Mashiro. Saying how funny it was.

"Uh, umm… I'm sorry for the ruckus…"

Dyed bright red, Sorata bowed to people around him in apology. In front of him, to the left, to the right and to the back… was what he was about to do, when he spotted a familiar face.

"Wouldn't you normally contact us if you found her?"

Jin, Nanami and Misaki, Ryuunosuke came into sight.

"I'm so happy that you actually have hot, youthful blood running in your veins, Kohai-kun! Tonight will be a party! We'll live up to our youthful lives!"

"W-When did you start looking at us?"

"It would be better if you didn't know."

Nanami seemed to be slightly down as she said that.

"「Don't go!」Hug!"

Misaki hugged Nanami as she said that.

"Whoaaa! Then you've already seen most of it!"

"No, I think it was more around 80% of it."

Jin's rectification didn't bring any sense of relief at all.

"That really is most of it then!"

"Sorata."

Mashiro tugged his elbow from behind.

"Huh, yeah, what is it? Actually, no… but will you be alright?"

"Hmm?"

"Not returning to England."

"I won't go."

“I see.”

“I’m only here to see Rita off.”

“What?”

Caught off guard, he yelped out. Both Nanami and Jin said “Ehh?” or “What?” as well. Misaki showed a passionate reaction, saying “What did you say!” and even Ryuunosuke put on a troubled expression and silently made an ‘hmm…’ sound.

“What… did you say?”

Did he hear it wrong? Yeah, he really hoped that was the case. If not, he would be in deep trouble. In many different ways…

“I won’t go.”

“After that!”

“I’m only here to see Rita off.”

Mashiro repeated herself with a blank expression.

“What?! What did you just say?! What’s going on!”

“It is just as what Mashiro said.”

A voice could be heard beside him. Rita stood up lightly. How long has she been there? Sorata didn’t notice her until now.

“Just as she said… then…”

His legs started to wobble. Not understanding what was going on, his legs started to wobble.

“Sorata, are you alright?”

“No, it’s just… you disappeared all of the sudden… isn’t it logical to think that way…. There was the phone call last night… and I heard that he’s coming to pick you up as well from the teacher…”

“He meant that he was coming to pick me up.”

Rita said that without a single worry in the world.

“I heard that you were going to the airport, to Narita…”

“That was to see me off.”

Everything before him started to go jet black. It felt like he was falling deeply into a slough.

“And the bit about winning a competition?”

“That was also me.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

Losing all of his strength, Sorata crouched down. Nanami also sat down and leaned on him. Whispering ‘No way’…

“Sorata, are you sick?”

“Who’re you calling sick!”

“In a way, you could call it an illness. A Mashiro-worrying-illness maybe?”

Said Rita, happily.

“Sorata, don’t come near me. I might be infected.”

“Don’t be ridiculous! You… everyone from Jin-senpai, Misaki-senpai, Aoyama, Akasaka and I came all the way here for you! Because we were worried about you!”

“Why?”

“I don’t know anymore! Stop playing around…”

Should he be glad, Sorata was experiencing an unexplainable feeling.

“If you’re that worried about Mashiro, then why don’t you put a collar around her neck and link a chain to it?”

“You want to?”

“I don’t!”

It felt like he won’t get up for a while.

“Well, if she’s not going, then there’s no problem right?”

Jin placed his hand on Sorata’s shoulder. He had a tired expression. Misaki hugged Mashiro energetically. Nanami was pouting and complaining. Ryuunosuke sighed deeply in a devastated manner. That summed up how the entire group was feeling.

“But wasn’t Mashiro’s father against her on becoming a mangaka?”

“About that, why don’t you talk to the person?”

Rita’s eyes were looking behind Sorata.

Mustering up his strength, he stood up and turned to the right.

In a cool coloured suit, there stood a man while drinking coffee from a paper cup. He must’ve been somewhere in his forties. A solid figure, he gave off the feeling of a middle aged man. He had a stern expression, and there were clear wrinkles on his forehead.

“I never knew that it was this unbearable to see my daughter in another man’s arms.”

“Ah, t-that’s, uh… I apologise.”

“You are?”

“M-My name is Sorata Kanda. I live in the same dorm as Shiina.”

“He’s my master.”

“What are you saying!”

“Is that so?”

“Father! That’s not it!”

“Who are you calling your father?”

“Ah! Never mind. I apologise!”

Even after seeing Sorata’s clumsy reactions, Mashiro’s father wasn’t agitated at all. At his sharp gaze, Sorata could only be pressed down and down again.

"I heard about it from Chihiro and Rita. Mashiro has been indebted to you all.”

Mashiro’s father looked around the Sakurasou members.

“Thank you to all of you. I was worried that my daughter might not fit in with the Japanese school life.”

“You really must’ve been… ah, so, you’re not here to take back Shiina?”

Sorata hesitantly asked the question.

“It seems like the information wasn’t delivered properly. I thought I told Chihiro quite clearly.”

“Didn’t you want Shiina to be a painter?”

“To be honest, I do.”

Sorata was taken back.

“But I know that one cannot become a painter just because they were forced to.”

What that meant was it would be difficult to touch people with a painting that was forcefully drawn. Because those emotions would be reflected onto the work.

“But wouldn’t anyone think that Shiina should be a painter with those skills?”

“That’s true. That’s what everyone would think. I won’t deny that I am one of those people.”

“Then why?”

“I only thought Mashiro how to draw. Subconsciously, I’ve been living until now, wanting my daughter to achieve the dreams that I couldn’t.”

“The dreams…”

Having raised up in a normal family, Sorata didn't fully understand.

"You'll realise it one day. I feel like I've been indebted while raising Mashiro up. When children around her age used to play outside, she sat there and drew paintings. While they shared their stories about their romance, Mashiro continued to draw paintings."

"But…"

"The potential for happiness depends on the person."

"But…"

"When I was younger, I used to dream of being a painter. But I couldn't achieve it. Even so, I don't think of my life as unfortunate. That's what being alive means, I think."

"…"

He had nothing else to say.

"It would be a lie to say that I wasn't surprised when Mashiro said that she was going to go to Japan. I wanted to be against it. I'm still swayed by it even now. Because that is how valuable Mashiro's skills are. And it's true that her skills touch many other people. In both good and bad ways."

Mashiro's father looked warmly at Rita.

"But it's also true that I'm relieved."

"Why is that?"

"Because Mashiro discovered something that she wants to do. In a place that wasn't known to me."

"… Did you know about her manga?"

"It's only natural for the parents to look over their child more than they could ever imagine."

Sorata wasn't able to understand how it would feel like to be a parent.

“And when Rita said that she was going to bring back Mashiro, I wasn’t able to stop her. I wanted my daughter to achieve something that I couldn’t.”

Mashiro’s father looked towards Rita.

“I must apologise, Rita. I tried to use you.”

“I was never being used. I would’ve come to Japan even if anyone tried to stop me.”

“I entrusted you with a villain’s role.”

Mashiro’s father bowed his head to Rita.

“Please don’t do this to me. It’s… something that I decided for myself. And there were a lot of things that I learnt while I was here.”

“I’m glad.”

“And I want to continue to draw. No matter what my grandfather says, and even if my parents are against it.”

Mashiro’s father silently nodded.

“I think I can understand it now. Why my grandfather told me to stop. I’ve been always leaning on Mashiro. So I think he told me to stop if I wasn’t going to start relying on myself. Since it’s a path that I have to walk alone.”

Mashiro gently wrapped her hands around Rita’s.

“I’ve got a question.”

When Sorata raised his hand, he attracted the looks from everyone there.

“How much of this did you know, Rita? Did you know that Shiina’s father accepted Shiina being a mangaka?”

“I swear that I never knew. I always thought that he wouldn’t allow anything else but being a painter…. And I had to desperately hide the fact that Mashiro was drawing a manga. Don’t you think that he would’ve found out a lot sooner if I didn’t?”

Saying that, Rita looked at him with a questioning look- asking him if he would’ve

been able to hide it.

But it is as she say.

“But in the end, the one who told her father about the mangaka was me…. After thinking about it, I just…”

He already heard about this in the rain yesterday.

“Well, it does seem like he knew about this from the start though.”

Mashiro’s father responded yes with his eyes at Rita’s assumption. Was this what it meant to be a father?

“So to sum it up, the one who caused this misunderstanding in the first place was that no-good teacher…”

Chihiro should’ve known that Mashiro’s father has allowed Mashiro to become a mangaka. Yet she spouted out some stuff about how Mashiro has chosen her path and pretended that her family was against it. Chihiro has really done it this time with the misunderstandings. He really thought that Mashiro was going to go back today…

“We should take our revenge comparable to the trouble that we went through.”

Jin said that like it was nothing.

“We should punish all wrong doings.”

Ryuunosuke added on.

Everyone of the Sakurasou members nodded in agreement.

“Please excuse us for a bit.”

Asking permission from Mashiro’s father, Sorata took out his phone.

Loading up Chihiro’s number, he held it up for everyone to see. Making eye-contact with everyone, he pressed the call button.

Their teacher quickly answered the phone.

“Old hag!”

Sorata yelled into the phone first.

“You’re expiry date is long past!”

Jin followed suit,

“We’ll baptise you with a packet of eggs.”

Nanami added on to it

“We came out to see Ritan off just in time thanks to you, Chihiro-sensei! We love you!”

Misaki consoled her

“You should give it up now.”

And Ryuunosuke ended it.

The call ended there. And at the same time, Sorata turned off his phone completely.

“That should do for now.”

Then the announcement for the flight to London rang out.

Mashiro’s father picked up the baggage. Rita stood next to him.

“I leave my daughter to all of you, and I think she will trouble you a lot from now on.”

Sorata had to hold back saying that she was already being troublesome anyway. It was because Mashiro’s father was wearing an indescribable expression.

“Although she may not be well known in Japan, Mashiro’s name is renowned across the world. Eventually, there will be people who will criticise Mashiro’s decision. When the word gets out that she’s now a mangaka, there will be adults who will discuss it for over three hours. When that happens, you could be swept up in that mess as well.”

“You don’t need to worry about them.”

Rita smiled as she said that.

“Because Mashiro lives in Sakurasou.”

One by one, the members looked at Rita.

“I see… you may be right. Although it was just a misunderstanding, all of you did come rushing here when you heard that Mashiro was returning to England. Please get along with her from now on as well.”

“Yes.”

Sorata and Nanami answered at the same time. Misaki held both of her hands up and answered that it was only obvious. Jin nodded his head, and Ryuunosuke looked down.

“I’m fine as long as you are just friends.”

Mashiro’s father looked straight at Sorata.

“Ah, yes, I understand.”

Another announcement to hurry the passengers rang out.

“It seems like our time is up. If you’ve decided to draw manga, then do your best, Mashiro.”

“Yes.”

The father and daughter hugged each other. After lightly hugging, they pulled away from each other fairly quickly. Mashiro proceeded to hug Rita. This time, she hugged her for longer.

“Rita, stay well.”

“You too, Mashiro.”

Aiming for them to pull apart, Misaki caught the chance to jump into Rita’s chest. His eyes met Rita’s.

“Do you want a hug as well, Sorata?”

“Do you think that I’ll be fooled again?”

It was pretty clear that she was only joking. That's how well he knew her. Hence, he was already starting to miss her.

"That's a pity. I wasn't joking this time."

"They say that the fish that gets away are the bigger ones~"

Smiling, Rita picked up her luggage.

"Hold on, freeloader."

The one who stopped her was Ryuunosuke. Everyone looked surprised.

"Unfortunately, I am no longer a freeloader."

"Former-freeloader."

"My name is Rita. You can call me by my name."

"Take this, former-freeloader."

What Ryuunosuke held out was a folded piece of paper.

With a letdown expression.

"What's this?"

She unfolded the paper. When she did, her eyes opened wide in surprise.

"An email address? Why to me?"

"I want to contact you when you're gone."

"What?"

Sorata yelled out without realising in surprise.

"Does that mean… that you…."

Rita started to blush.

"I need you."

“Are you serious?!”

“Is this how it is?!”

Sorata and Nanami’s voices overlapped each other and Jin wolf whistled.

“Well then, Ritan’s answer is!”

Misaki approached with her with an invisible mike in her hand. Not batting an eyelid at Misaki, Rita took out a memo pad from deep inside her bag and wrote something on it after ripping a page out. She handed it to Ryuunosuke.

“What’s this?”

“That’s my email address. It’s something that I don’t usually give out to men even when they ask for it.”

Looking at prideful Rita, Ryuunosuke handed the paper to Sorata.

“Why are you giving this to me?”

“Because the one who’ll be in contact with her will be you. The email that gave to her was yours as well.”

“What?”

What did Ryuunosuke say? He wasn’t able to get a good grasp of it. Rita appeared to be confused as well.

“We’ll set up a FTP server for the uploads and we’ll contact you when we do.”

“Yes…”

Rita replied half heartedly.

Although Sorata and Nanami stood there in shock, Rita couldn’t stop smiling.

“So this was what you meant when you needed me?”

“Of course. What else would I mean?”

“While we’re at it, why don’t you tell me your email as well, Ryuunosuke?”

Rita continued to smile and talk. But her expression was now somewhat intimidating…. Very intimidating….

“The protection for my PC is perfect. Virus attacks won’t work against me. And even if you do send some, Maid-chan will take care of it with her inbuilt program functions. Don’t be foolish about it.”

“I don’t plan to send you viruses. Please don’t put me on the same level as those who do.”

“Then why do you want to know my email address?”

“Because I am interested in you as an opposite sex.”

“Are you serious?!”

“So it was like that?!”

Sorata and Nanami were surprised again, and Jin wolf whistled again.

“Well then, Dragon’s reply is!”

Misaki held the invisible mike to Ryuunosuke this time.

“What an unnecessary emotion. Throw it in the bin as you go.”

“What do you think a person’s feelings are?”

“Love is nothing but a bug that shows up in the neuro-electronical activities in the brain.”

“It seems like I really need to punish you.”

She must’ve reached her boiling point, because Rita approached Ryuunosuke and held her right hand up high.

“How pointless. That won’t work on me.”

Ryuunosuke leisurely smiled.

Everyone there focused their sight on Rita’s hand. Of course Ryuunosuke looked as well…

That was why he probably didn't notice. That Rita was making a face like a mischievous kid…

So that was most likely why Ryuunosuke couldn't avoid it- Rita's mischievous scheme…

While holding up her right hand up high, Rita stood up on her tippy-toes and lightly kissed Ryuunosuke on the cheeks before everyone's eyes.

Sorata opened his mouth wide in surprise and Mashiro let out an 'ah' sound. Nanami blushed and Jin wolf whistled again.

"Ritan, not bad~."

Misaki hopped up and down as she said that. Mashiro's father sighed, saying 'kids these days'.

Rita slowly pulled away. As soon as she did, Ryuunosuke feel backwards like a board without its supports.

"Whoaa! Akasaka! Get a hold of yourself!!"

Sorata called out Ryuunosuke's name. He tried to talk to him over and over again. But there was no response. He was completely out of it. This was what happens when Ryuunosuke comes in contact with a girl.

"That was for making me angry. Have you reflected on your wrong doings?"

Rita asked with a satisfied expression.

"Uhh, Akasaka can't hear you right now!"

"How unfortunate. Then please tell him this when he wakes up.「See you again soon」."

Sorata agreed to it for now.

"Then I'll really be going now."

Rita stood next to Mashiro's father and said farewell. The two passed through the customs and walked through the gates. As she got on an escalator that was going

down, Rita turned around and started to wave.

“Everyone, good bye!”

“Come by again!”

Sorata yelled that to her. Mashiro was waving her hand with all her strength.

Sakurasou members continued to look at Rita until her hand disappeared out of their sight.

“They’re gone.”

Nanami’s voice sounded slightly lonely. Sorata could only answer with a short ‘yeah’. Everyone there felt the same way- whether it was Mashiro or Jin. No-one really tired to talk. A hole has opened up in their hearts- the place where Rita used to be was no empty. They were feeling emotional about it.

However, among them was an alien that couldn’t read the mood.

“Now, Kohai-kun, hold this!”

Misaki handed over the large Santa’s sack that was in the car to Sorata. He looked inside. It contained some white cloth and bunch of drawing tools. It was quite heavy.

“What’s this?”

“We came here to see them off, so we really need to do that! We’ll be late if we don’t hurry!”

Lead by Misaki’s hand, everyone started to run for some reason. Mashiro and Nanami followed behind, and Jin was giving Ryuunosuke a piggyback ride.

“What are we doing?”

“Something great obviously~!”

Misaki continued to laugh.

Planned to arrive at the Heathrow Airport at half past 5 in the morning, the airplane

started to make its way to the runway.

Sitting down by the passenger seat, Rita Ainsworth was wearing the seat belt as instructed.

The time she stayed in Japan was nearly a month, but that came to an end today. Closing her eyes, she started to reminiscence about her stay here. Checking through her feelings one by one, she treasured them deep inside her heart.

Sakurasou was a fun place. The people there would be unforgettable for her.

And she honestly wanted to come back to that place some day.

The airplane reached the runway. An announcement for its departure was shortly announced.

The jet engines started to turn and the airplane started to shake. As the plan slowly accelerated, the scenery outside flashed past. That was when she noticed that.

The airport building. On the observation deck, there were shadows of people.

Six people were there waving their hands.

From the right was the tallest one- Jin. Next to him was Misaki, who was hopping up and down. At the centre were Mashiro and Sorata. Nanami was waving both of her hands. At the far left, Ryuunosuke could be seen as well. Although his face wasn't visible, Rita could imagine his grumpy expression. But she was glad.

As the airplane passed by the observation deck, a large banner was displayed on its fence.

A long piece of cloth.

When Rita read the words on that banner, she teared up. Her nose went numb. Tears filled up her eyes.

— Soar magnificently, our friend!

Sakurasou members were shouting something as well. Obviously, Rita couldn't hear them. But she could feel what they were saying anyway.

The airplane sped up and it soared up into the sky.

Tear drops started to fall from Rita's eyes.

She was crying innumerable number of drops….

But she didn't even think about wiping away her tears.

"We can't lose to those kids can we."

"Yes."

Because they are my precious friends…

The airplane flew far, far away with a great thundering noise.

"I wonder if she could see it clearly."

Sorata followed the airplane with his eyes as he wiped away the paint on his face with his sleeve.

It was a banner that was equivalent to the combined size of three bed sheets. It should've been big enough.

"The possibility of the former-freeloader sitting at the window seats is quite low. It was probably a wasted effort."

Ryuunosuke was more concerned about the paint marks on his uniform. On his white shirt, there were red and yellow paint spots.

"Don't say that, Akasaka."

Nanami was getting angry at him. But she didn't intimidating at all with the paint marks on her forehead.

"Forgive him. After all, he did help us out when he woke up."

Jin tried to wipe away the paint on his pants with his hand. But it wasn't going to be that easy. In fact, he made it worse because and got paint on his hands.

As if he was lost for words at himself as well, Jin hunched down.

Looking at everyone's faces as Sorata packed up the art tools; he could tell that everyone looked silly. With their faces, hands and uniform covered in paint, everyone appeared to be colourful.

Seeing each other's faces, they broke out in laughter.

Although they didn't know if it worked, they were glad that they made the effort to do it. Misaki's ability to adapt to any situation and her quick thinking were truly amazing.

That very Misaki was still writing something on a spare sheet even when the airplane was well out of sight.

"Please help us to pack up, Misaki-senpai."

"Check out my work! We should've gone with this one!"

Misaki held up her sheet proudly, and on it read「Always Victorious!」.

"What are we, some national team?! And please don't mess around with the sheets!"

"They're all from Kohai-kun's room, so it doesn't matter!"

The paint covered alien laughed out loudly.

"You'll be sleeping while being covered in「Always Victorious!」from now on, Sorata."

"Congratulations, Kanda."

"Don't be so mean just because it doesn't involve you!"

While bickering like that, they finished packing up.

"Since we're all out, why don't we eat something on our back?"

Holding the sack, Jin started to walk away first.

"I want to eat some Okonomiyaki~."

Misaki followed behind him.

"I don't mind what we eat, but we're not going to Hiroshima."

Nanami stated her terms quite clearly.

“Alright, Nanamin! We’ll go to Nanamin’s hometown! We’ll make do with Osaka~!”

“That’s not allowed either!”

It was impossible to go on an eight hour drive trip. Unless she was planning to ride the flight there in on go. Ryuunosuke quietly started to walk as well.

“Shiina, let’s go.”

Mashiro continued to look up at the sky even after the airplane has flown off.

“Shiina?”

“…”

“Did you want to go with her?”

Mashiro shook her head slightly.

“Let’s go. Otherwise, we’ll leave you behind.”

He started to follow behind the group.

“Sorata.”

Turning around, he saw Mashiro’s beautiful face covered in paint standing at the centre of the observation deck.

“What is it?”

When Sorata asked, Mashiro held both of her hands to her chest. And she looked away from Sorata to avert his gaze.

“This part feels weird.”

“I can feel a thumping sound from here… since then.”

“Since then?”

While having her head bowed, Mashiro looked up slightly.

“Since Sorata told me not to go.”

“Ah! T-That’s!”

“Ever since Sorata hugged me tightly.”

“Whoaa! Please forget about that!”

He started to sweat from every part of his body. He wasn’t trying to deny his feelings, but he was just embarrassed that he was found out.

“Please forget about it! I’m begging you!”

Sorata pleaded to Mashiro over and over again.

But Mashiro’s answer was blunt.

“No.”

“Then how will you forget it!”

Did he have to look at Mashiro’s face from now on like this? His feelings were completely reveled now.

“It’s still here.”

Mashiro closed her eyes in a prayer like manner.

“W-What is?”

“Sorata’s voice is still ringing in my ears.”

He couldn’t take it for any longer. He wanted to turn around and sprint away to somewhere far, far away.

“And Sorata’s warmth from you as well.”

“D-Don’t describe it like that!”

Mashiro appeared to be shaken before Sorata. Her usually calm eyes where slightly wavering.

“What happened to me.”

“W-What do you mean…”

She must’ve been nervous, because Mashiro tightly clasped her two hands.

“Hey Sorata.”

“W-What is it?”

“Is this…”

Mashiro started to blush as she closed her eyes. It wasn’t because of the setting sun.

“S-Shiina?”

He tried to say something else, but saying her name was hard enough. Mashiro stared directly at Sorata.

Sorata’s brain ceased to function at the look.

“…”

Sorata swallowed his saliva in that suffocating situation. However, that didn’t help at all, and his heart beat sounded louder than ever before and Mashiro wasn’t going to stop.

“Is this…”

“… Shiina.”

“Could this be…”

“…”

No words escaped from Sorata’s dried up throat.

Mashiro’s next words were orchestrated by her thin lips. But at the same time, an airplane flew off from the runway with a thundering noise.

He couldn’t hear the words. Judging from the movement of Mashiro’s lips, it was only two syllables. But that short word was buried under the engine noises.

However, Sorata's body heated up, and he started to let off steam from his head.

Mashiro's lips

Spelled out this word to Sorata…

— Love. [26]

<End of Book 3>

Author's Notes

Somehow, with the release of「Sakurasou no Pet Kanojou」volume 3, I was able to celebrate the eventful eleven published volumes. You don't need to worry yourself on what I need to celebrate about.

To put t simply, I really didn't do anything noteworthy when I released my tenth volume…

But it can't be helped. It's not like there's someone who will pop streamers and congratulate me, and it's not like I'm having a class change when I'm already an author.

Today's only a day that it has subsequently switched over from yesterday.

That's what the world is like. It works this way. Eventually, you will become older and change from a youth to an old man so to all those youth out there, please be careful.

Just like how the national boarder lines aren't visible from outer space, the difference between being a youth and an old man isn't quite visible. Even I stepped over that line without realising. Wow… how scary.

As I start to wonder what I'm actually talking about and come to a forced close, I would like to say that this volume was published, including this ranting author's notes, thanks to all of readers out there. I am really thankful to every one of you. Please continue your support in the future as well.

The 4th volume would most likely be released during the cold season.

The culture festival is finally (?) starting, so I'm not sure if I would be able to have the same atmosphere as the other usual school life works. It might not…

I can make out what will happen to our 3rd years during their left time. Of course, Sorata and Mashiro's relationship will completely change…. Is what I have planned out, so please read volume 4 for the actual events.

I would like to thank Keeji Mizoguchi for handling the poster illustrations. Everyone, please keep your eyes peeled for a large poster of Mashiro on your nearest bookstore walls.

In many ways, I was indebted to my editor Araki as well.

I believe that we'll meet again in the next volume…

Hajime Kamoshida

References

1. ↑ Pervert- pronounced ‘hentai’
2. ↑ Transformation- pronounced ‘hentai’
3. ↑ You might have seen it in animes, but after you do a radio exercise, you get a stamp as a reward.
4. ↑ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wandervogel
5. ↑ As you can see, I suck at doing these long list-like paragraph translations.
6. ↑ ”Finally I recalled the stopgap solution of a great princess who was told that the peasants had no bread, and who responded: "Let them eat brioche."
7. ↑ Written in Japanese phonetically
8. ↑ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Tale_of_the_Bamboo_Cutter
9. ↑ T/N: I think I know where it all goes to… ;)
10. ↑ T/N: Grow some balls maybe?
11. ↑ A game that the players have to start a word/sentence with the last letter used previously. Also note that the following conversation was translated from Korean, so I don’t know how the conversation was like in Japanese. Also, I translated this with the best of my abilities, but some parts might sound forced.
12. ↑ Again, this was done to the best of my abilities to show Misaki and Rita’s mistakes.
13. ↑ Pervert- pronounced ‘hentai’
14. ↑ Transformation- pronounced ‘hentai’
15. ↑ Stuck in
16. ↑ I don’t know what it says in Japanese, but this is how it’s written in Korean. Basically what it’s saying is, when you eat tomatoes, you get healthy. So doctors won’t get any patients to treat and won’t profit.
17. ↑ Mashiro says ‘unison’ phonetically- she didn’t understand what unison meant. This wasn’t a mistake on my behalf.
18. ↑ Non-Disclosure Agreement
19. ↑ Said in English
20. ↑ Ryuunosuke is a male name
21. ↑ Referring to the Cymbal-banging monkey toy
22. ↑ Normally, you take your shoes off when you’re at home and some other places
23. ↑ Referring to the art exhibition day
24. ↑ Yes, I suck at using dialects. Editors, please change it to how you see fit.
25. ↑ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shibuya,_Tokyo#Shibuya_Crossing

26. ↥ Love is ‘Koi’ in Japanese. Pronounced Ko-I

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